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M/M

Ensemble Stars! (Video Game)

Itsuki Shuu/Kagehira Mika

Itsuki Shuu
Kagehira Mika
Sakuma Rei
Itsuki Shuu's Grandfather
Itsuki Shuu's Family
Sakuma Ritsu
Shinkai Kanata
Morisawa Chiaki
Hakaze Kaoru
Sakasaki Natsume
Hibiki Wataru
Tenshouin Eichi

Alternate Universe - Fantasy
Shapeshifting
Alternate Universe - Shapeshifters
Complicated Relationships
my weak attempt at world building
Crow Mika
Fluff and Angst
Switching
Anal Sex
Switch SHMK/MKSH
English

Proteus

UncertifiedTherapist

Notes:

this is my first time attempting to write a long-fic... forgive me if things are a mess
also can you tell I finished watching hotd

(See the end of the work for more notes (#work_endnotes).)

Chapter 1 (http://archiveofourown.org/works/80032311/chapters/210082951)

“Will there be wine for the evening, or—“
“Master,” Mika’s voice comes quietly from the bed, where he lay draped beneath an array of blankets, his body hidden from sight.
“Mika, one moment—“
“Nn… master, who’s here?”

“I told you, didn’t I? Rei will be arriving later today. And if I don’t consult the staff about the preparations, he won’t be happy.”

Mika sinks deeper into the bed, sulking. “Rei… why d’you like him so much?”

“It’s not… That’s not the correct word. I respect him.” Shu murmurs something to the man at the door, and then shuts it. “Don’t tell me that’s what has been bothering you.”

Shu returns to the bed, peeling back the covers to join Mika.

“You’re warm,” he says, passing a hand over Mika’s bare body.

“It is botherin’ me,” Mika exhales shakily. “Ya won’t leave me fer ‘im, will you?”

“I could not, and will not.” Shu says sternly, pulling Mika closer by the waist. “Come here, little crow. There is a reason I’ve let you live with me in my chambers for the past two years. Do you know what that is?”

“Mm…” Mika nuzzles against Shu’s chest, taking a deep breath. “I think… yes… ya love me, isn’t that it?”

“Yes. I love you. I want you here. So there’s no need to worry about being replaced.” Shu threads his fingers through Mika’s hair, pulling at a few tangled strands. “You’ll accompany me this evening, won’t you?”

“…Am I allowed?”

“Why wouldn’t you be?”

“Well, yer family isn’t here…”

“I am hosting Rei alone for the time being. That being said, I may do as I please.”

“Won’t there be questions?” Mika whines, “everyone already knows you keep a shifter in yer bed. Hardly anyone ever gets to see me. I don’t wanna cause a scene.”

“Mika…” Shu kisses the top of his head. “If it worries you so, feel free to shift. I’ll happily keep you perched on my shoulder. No matter what form you take, I’d like you beside me tonight.”

Mika preens, pushing his face harder into Shu’s chest.

“Master…”

“Careful, saying my name like that…”

—

Mika takes the form of his crow for the evening and remains perched on Shu’s shoulder until dusk, when dinner concludes and Shu excuses himself early.

“Rei is a unique individual, isn’t he?” Shu asks Mika as they return to his chambers. Mika responds with a soft caw.

Shu removes the broach from his cloak, placing it on the table. Then, he reaches up and scratches Mika’s feathers, “Will you come back to me?”

The crow hops down onto the floor, and Shu resumes undressing while he waits; Mika’s transformation takes but a moment.

“Nn… cold…” He hears the youngster mutter behind him.

“Then go to bed.”

“I don't want to go without ya.”

“It will be only a moment.”

Shu slips his cloak off of his shoulders, and lays it across the back of a chair. Mika’s hands slide over his waist, nudging insistently at the rest of his clothing.

“Mika,” Shu mutters, undoing the laces of his trousers, and pulling his doublet and undershirt off at the same time.

Mika’s hands trail down his back, cold and soft.

“You never answered me,” Shu says quietly, catching Mika’s reflection in the mirror. “What did you think of Rei?”

Mika hooks his chin over Shu’s shoulder. “Does it really matter?”

Shu frowns. “It does. I want your opinion,” he says.

“I thought he was fine,” Mika admits. “But he scares me. He’s intimidatin’. He was born from a half-breed, wasn’t he?” Mika kisses up the side of Shu’s neck.

“...His father is a nobleman and his mother was a half-breed, making him—“ Shu inhales, tilting his head. “Ah. We’ll discuss it later. I’m tired. To bed with you.”

Mika giggles under his breath. Shu takes him by the wrist and leads him to the bed, giving the crow a gentle nudge. Mika scrambles beneath the covers, shivering.

“Good,” Shu says, sliding in behind him, “let’s warm you up. I dislike when you’re cold like this.”

“I can’t help it,” Mika says.

“As much as I appreciate your nudity, I do wish your clothing would shift with you.”

“I’ve tried,” Mika says. “They never do.”

“Mm…” Shu sighs. He pets Mika’s face, staring at his mismatched eyes for a long moment. Mika looks away.

Shu's fingers dance across his chin, "Don't be shy."

"I don't like it when you look at 'em too long," Mika breathes.

"There's nothing wrong with them," Shu says, "I love your eyes, Mika. An absurd amount." He rubs a thumb beneath Mika's blue eye. "They fascinated me the moment I saw you. Don't you remember? I couldn't look away."

"I was afraid then," Mika says softly.

"Yes, you've told me that," Shu sighs bitterly. "...I wish that hadn't been the case."

"Master… even so, I felt… like ya were pullin' me in," Mika says, wrapping his arms around Shu. "No one has ever stared at me like that without bad intentions, not 'til you…"

Shu cups Mika's face and kisses him gently. Mika hums into his mouth, the sound sending a pleasant thrill through Shu. Mika's tongue presses against his lips, seeking more, and Shu allows it for a moment. He pulls back, licking his lips,

"I have to be up before dawn," Shu says. "Rei usually sleeps during the day. I promised to show him the grounds before the sun rose."

"Mm… ya don't think that's strange?" Mika asks skeptically.

Shu smiles faintly. He shakes his head, "No stranger than you."

"Can't we do… just a bit?"

"You're insatiable," Shu mumbles. "Fine. But then we must sleep. Understood?"

"Ah, *yes*..."

Shu rolls him onto his back, pressing kisses down his chest, his stomach, his navel— Mika parts his thighs as Shu sinks further down his body.

"*Master*," Mika pants, eyes fluttering as Shu takes him into his mouth. He doesn't waste a second, sucking how Mika likes, coaxing sweet sounds from him.

Mika reaches down to thread his fingers through Shu's hair. It doesn't take very long. Shu only has to use his mouth for a few minutes before Mika spills down his throat.

The taste is unpleasant as usual, but Shu doesn't complain. He wipes his mouth, crawling back up to lay beside Mika, who squirms when Shu pets his tummy.

"Is that better?"

Mika curls into him. "Mhm... I can sleep now."

—

"Mika. Are you joining me?"

"…This early?" Mika yawns, lifting his head.

"What did you think 'before dawn' meant? Come. Get dressed. I have your clothes. It will only be us and Rei, there's no need for you to shift."

"Can't ya do it fer me?" His accent thickens with sleep as he drags himself upright.

"Fine. I'll dress you," Shu slips his hands beneath Mika's arms. He struggles to haul him out of bed. "Hm… You've grown a lot, I can hardly lift you now."

"*Ngah*," Mika squeaks. "'S that a bad thing?"

"…You're still small," Shu replies dryly. "Don't worry about that. Here, lift your arms."

He dresses Mika, layering him well for warmth and fastening his cloak with one of his own broaches. Mika idly rubs the smooth surface with his thumb.

Shu dresses quickly after. Mika watches from the bed, eyes lingering.

"Come," Shu says once he's finished, offering his hand.

—

"Ah. So this is the crow they speak of."

"You saw him yesterday," Shu says evenly.

"In another form," Rei says, studying Mika. His scrutiny makes Mika shrink, hiding behind Shu's arm.

"Mika…" Shu warns gently.

Rei sighs. "You keep him hidden away. It's no wonder he's so shy."

"I have little choice," Shu says. "The people would tear him apart. Let's go, we have limited time before sunrise."

"I won't perish if it rises," Rei says with a faint laugh. "You know that much, don't you? It's preference. Or perhaps biology—I feel stronger at night."

"I didn't wish to assume…"

They walk the gardens and the old aviary, long emptied but still pristine. Mika remains silent the entire time, pressed close to Shu's side. They follow the ancient stone path to the lake and back as dawn begins to break.

“Mika—may I call you that?” Rei says softly near the doors. “It was a pleasure to meet you. I hope Shu allows you out more often.”

Mika says nothing.

“I apologize,” Shu says quietly. “If you wish to travel to the Royal Manor soon, I can arrange a carriage—”

“That won’t be necessary,” Rei interrupts. “I remain here until summoned by the King. Your family offered lodging since you’re closest to the manor. I’m mainly here for him... You were told that, weren’t you?”

Shu blinks. “I was told nothing.”

Frustration tightens in his chest… being the youngest son, he is rarely entrusted with anything of importance. Even his sister holds more favor. To his family, he is little more than a caretaker of the old castle.

Rei looks him over, as if considering something. “We’ll discuss it further over supper.”

Shu nods stiffly.

“Thank you for the tour.” Rei says, disappearing down the corridor toward his quarters.

“I’d like to rest,” Shu says abruptly.

“*Nnn*... Master, are ya unwell? We usually have tea…”

“I’m not sick,” Shu replies, sharper than intended. He turns and gently pulls Mika along. “Let’s return to bed.”

—

“Nn— *Ah! Ah—*“

“Do I need to sew your mouth shut? I told you to be quiet, little crow.”

“M- Master—“ Mika whines, “‘m sorry, it’s hard when you’re doing that—“

“Doing what?” Shu asks, his voice low. “This?” He thrusts deeper, and Mika clamps a hand over his mouth to stifle himself.

“That’s better,” Shu pants. “Keep your hand like that… Ah, one day I’ll take you somewhere you can be as loud as you please. Would you enjoy that? A trip to the sea, perhaps—“

Shu buries himself to the hilt, toes curling. Mika’s eyes brim with tears as he struggles to remain quiet. Shu looks down at him, his heart racing.

Just as he’s about to move again, there’s a knock at his door.

“Ugh,” Shu exhales, rolling his eyes. “Will they not leave me alone for once?”

The knocking comes again, firmer this time.

“Mika,” Shu leans down and kisses the back of his palm. “I’d stay in bed with you forever. Let’s run away.”

A third knock.

“I’m coming!” Shu shouts back irritably.

A quiet laugh slips from Mika. Shu laughs too, catching the irony. Carefully, he pulls out and presses Mika’s thighs together with his hands. “Stay like that. Don’t touch yourself. I doubt this is anything important—“

The door swings open just as he rises from the bed. Shu freezes, eyes widening and he covers them both with a blanket.

“S- Sister?”

—

“What did she want?”

“She’s returned to watch over the castle,” Shu says, tugging lightly at his earlobe. “Apparently my grandsire is ill. Though this is hardly the first time he’s claimed as much. He’s old and lonely—he invents ailments to lure visitors.” He sighs. “Of course, he requested me specifically. I don’t mind being his favorite, but it’s such a long journey…”

Mika shifts closer, tucking himself against Shu’s side. “That’s a little sad, isn’t it?”

“I suppose.” Shu shrugs. “But it’s vexing. If he desires company, he could simply ask instead of causing alarm. And now I’m worried—what if he truly is unwell this time?”

“Shouldn’t ya go, then?”

Shu arches a brow down at him.

“If I go, you’re coming with me.”

“*Mm*... really?”

“I worry about leaving you here. The roads are dangerous, but at least you’d be beside me. And my grandsire is… unusual. I suspect you’d like him.”

“…Unusual?”

“Peculiar... I don’t know.” Shu exhales. “You like me, after all. You clearly favor strange company.”

“Nn… I don’t think you’re strange at all.”

“Nonsense. Don’t lie.”

“Mm, not lyin’…” Mika hums, sliding a leg over Shu’s and pressing closer. “Ya left me by myself…”

"It's been hours since then. You're still thinking about that?"

"I couldn't do nothin' but sit there and think about you," Mika replies, as if that explains everything.

—

"*You can't keep him here.*"

"I refuse to send him away!" Shu shouts across the table at his brother. "Our family's aviary has stood empty for centuries. It's been that long since a shifter walked these grounds, and now that there finally is one, you want to send him away? I don't understand—what harm is there in keeping him—"

"Baby brother," his brother interrupts him, "I know many things go unexplained to you. That doesn't mean you may do as you please."

"Then explain it to me," Shu snaps. "For once in my life, tell me the truth. Why is the aviary empty? What is this unexplained disdain for shifters?"

His brother looks down at his plate. "That isn't my place… Just do as you're told. For once."

"I always do as I'm told," Shu fires back. "I have done as I'm told since I learned to walk. I have never disobeyed. I stay in this castle while you all roam freely. I do nothing but study and read from dawn to dusk. So forgive me if I am finally at my breaking point."

He rises abruptly from the table. "I'm excusing myself. And do not send any maids to my chambers. Goodnight."

Shu storms from the dining hall, his head lowered as staff bow in his wake. His fists are clenched so tightly his nails bite into his palms. Once inside his quarters, he shuts and latches the door.

"Mika," Shu says, drawing in a steadying breath. "You may come out now…"

A crow emerges from beneath the bed.

"No," Shu says softly. "Change. I want—" His voice tightens. "I need to see you."

—

"We'll have to stay at an inn for one night," Shu says, patting Mika's head as the carriage rolls along the uneven road. He would have preferred to ride his own horse, but keeping Mika hidden matters more if they pass through any towns. And Mika can only remain a crow for so many hours at a time.

"An Inn?"

"We will have a private room and guards nearby. Don't fret."

Even though Shu reassures him, there's a trace of unease in his voice. The last time he left the castle, he had been sixteen—more than three years ago.

"It smells like booze in 'ere," Mika mutters, wrinkling his nose as he begins removing his clothes out of habit.

"Unfortunately, most roadside inns do," Shu replies with quiet disdain, grateful his senses are not as sharp. He can smell it, but not so strongly that it unsettles him. "We cannot have a proper bath, but I can wipe you down if you feel unclean. It was warm today, you're likely sweaty."

"Nn, yes…" Mika hums contentedly. "But I do like the heat more than the cold…"

He collapses onto the bed with his arms stretched wide, completely at ease in his nudity.

Shu bends with a soft sigh and gathers Mika's discarded clothes from the floor. He folds them neatly and places them atop the chest at the foot of the bed. Setting his satchel beside Mika, he retrieves a cloth and a small glass bottle of water.

He leans over him, looking down at him longer than necessary. Mika's pale skin, the delicate outline of his ribs, the narrow curve of his waist… each is visible as he stretches.

Mika tilts his head up at him. "Don't stare, Master…"

Shu exhales quietly and dampens the cloth before beginning his task.

He wipes beneath Mika's arms, across his stomach, along his thighs. Mika is hardly dirty, but Shu insists on the ritual all the same. He finds something grounding in tending to him. He actively avoids what is begging for his attention between Mika's legs.

"Master…"

Shu's hand pauses. "Is it common among shifters to be so… insistent?"

"I don't know… I've never met another one…" Mika says, his back arching. "Don't ya feel it too?"

"Of course I do," Shu replies evenly. "That does not mean that I indulge every impulse."

Mika huffs softly. "Mmm… maybe yer different from other humans…"

"Would you rather I took advantage of you whenever the faintest thought crossed my mind?"

"I wouldn't mind," Mika answers bluntly.

"You…" Shu shakes his head faintly, setting the cloth aside. He gestures toward the bed. "Under the covers."

Mika slips beneath them with a small, dissatisfied sound. "Are ya going to touch me?"

Shu pauses, considering him. "…I'll think about it."

—

"We're close to the sea. I can smell it," Mika says, tugging the curtain aside to peer out the carriage window.

Shu keeps his place in the book resting in his lap, though he does glance up. "Did I forget to mention? The keep my grandsire resides in is only a short walk from the shore."

Mika hums, pleased. "Ngah, I want to go swimmin'."

"You've never mentioned that before."

"Well, there's nowhere to swim where ya live, is there?"

"There are lakes."

"That's not the same," Mika insists.

Shu studies him for a moment. "So you've been to the sea before?"

Mika hesitates. He has shared very little about his past. He claims he remembers almost none of it—whether that is truth or deflection, Shu has never pressed him too hard. Mika is still young. Whatever shadows exist in his adolescence cannot be so terrible… or so Shu prefers to believe.

"I remember… Only when I was very small, I think." Mika chews at his lower lip. "It's the sea itself I remember. Not who I was with. Not where. Just… the sound of it." His voice lowers. "I wish I remembered more."

Shu closes his book. "Then we shall make time for it. In truth, much of this visit will be leisure. As I said, my grandsire likely only desires company."

The carriage slows as they approach the gates. Gravel crunches beneath the wheels before it halts.

Shu gathers their belongings and steps down first, then offers Mika his hand. The soil here is different. Rockier, salted faintly by the nearby shore. Mika nudges a pebble with the toe of his boot while the driver unloads a small traveling chest.

"Master, can ya carry all that?"

Shu lifts it without much visible strain. "I may look fragile at times, but I am not helpless. It is hardly anything."

"I can help…"

"No," Shu says lightly. "Come."

"Shu!"

His grandsire looks remarkably like him… and also remarkably healthy, despite his claims.

The family resemblance is undeniable—same features, the same pink hair, though the elder's has long since faded to a dusty white.

Shu barely has time to set the chest down before he is pulled into an embrace as though he were still a child.

"And this," his grandsire says, stepping past him, "must be the crow I have heard so much about."

Mika instinctively edges closer to Shu.

"Do not worry," the old man says gently. "I will not touch you. I respect that you have chosen a master of your own already—ah, that *is* the case, is it not? I am told he calls you by that name."

Shu straightens slightly. "Yes. Though I think of him as far more than a pet."

"Well, of course," his grandsire replies smoothly. "He is a shifter."

He gestures toward the doorway. "I will have my men bring your belongings to your rooms."

"Rooms?" Mika murmurs under his breath.

"Do not fret," the old man adds, with a knowing glance that makes both of them stiffen. "They are adjoining."

There is a hint of understanding in his tone that leaves both Shu and Mika flushing despite themselves.

"I was told you were ill," Shu says during dinner.

The table here is far smaller than the one at the castle, allowing them to sit closer. The familiarity between them shows in subtle ways. Mika sits beside Shu, observant.

"Mm… it was a slight exaggeration," his grandsire admits. "I may have implied as much to your sister. I apologize if I caused you distress."

"You did," Shu replies evenly. "Greatly. As you have each time you've claimed illness. Next time, send a letter. I will come if you simply ask."

His grandsire gives a faint, almost sheepish hum. "Noted. Though it is humiliating, growing old alone breeds a certain desperation."

He stabs a piece of meat on his plate a bit too forcefully, the sharp sound making Mika flinch. Shu's hand slides

over Mika's thigh beneath the table.

"I have a request, Shu."

Shu straightens slightly. "Oh. What is it?"

"Would it pain you to move here? Or at least remain longer than a week?" His grandsire's voice softens. "I could send men to retrieve your belongings from the castle."

Shu is visibly taken aback. He leans back in his chair, fingers tightening slightly against Mika's leg beneath the table. "That is… sudden."

"I am aware."

"Perhaps," Shu says carefully, "I may be given time to consider it?"

"Of course."

Shu hesitates, then adds quietly, glancing at Mika, "And… he would remain with me."

"I would never demand you part from him," his grandsire replies without hesitation. "Not after you have chosen."

—

"Two beds…"

"You're free to sleep alone if you'd prefer. When was the last time you did?" Shu asks lightly.

"I don't want to," Mika replies at once, almost sharply, as if the suggestion itself offends him.

"It was only a suggestion," Shu says, blinking in surprise.

"Unless you want to sleep alone, Master?"

"N…not at all," Shu answers quickly.

The rooms are larger than he expected. His grandsire's taste is not unlike his own, though he does wonder if much of the decor was chosen by his late wife rather than the old man himself. Either way, the keep's interior is refined and comfortable. Shu runs his fingers along the bedspread, admiring the intricate beadwork stitched into the fabric.

"I have grown accustomed to you. I would rather share a bed," Shu admits quietly.

"Even if I get too warm?"

Shu smiles faintly. "I can endure a little extra heat."

"Breakfast…" Shu murmurs after the long night, once the sun has risen. "If we linger too long, my grandsire will grow suspicious."

"I think he already is," Mika says drowsily, lashes fluttering. His hands slide down Shu's back, settling suggestively against his rear. "Hm… I want…"

"I know what you're about to ask," Shu says. "And the answer is no."

Mika sulks immediately.

"At least not right now," Shu adds. "Did you not hear what I said?"

As if on cue, Mika's stomach growls.

Shu lets out a soft laugh. "Kakaka! Precisely. Let us see to a meal first."

—

The day drags, but Shu scarcely notices. He's buried himself in his grandsire's collection, a small stack of volumes already finished at his elbow. Fiction, history, obscure records… he moves through them one by one.

Across the room, Mika sprawls in a lounging chair, a small kitten draped across his stomach. They had stumbled upon it wandering the corridors earlier; it seems to have adopted him without question.

"Are ya sure yer not a farm cat?" Mika murmurs, scratching beneath its chin. "Hmm… where'd ya come from, I wonder…"

"We should ask around," Shu replies absently, turning a page. "You may have stolen some unfortunate child's companion."

Mika pouts. "I don't want to give it back. I want something that's mine."

Shu's eyes flick up briefly. "You would rob a child so easily? How ruthless."

The kitten curls deeper into Mika's robes. After a moment, Mika sits upright.

"What are ya even reading?" he asks. "You've been there for hours. I'm bored. Let's do something."

"Leisure," Shu says dryly. "You might attempt it."

"We never continued from this morning," Mika mutters, setting the kitten gently on the floor. It pads after him as he approaches the desk. "Master…"

Shu arches a brow. "I don't have the energy to resume that particular endeavor." He taps the open book lightly.

“My grandsire possesses texts I’ve never encountered before. Historical accounts, especially. The records regarding shifters are fascinating.”

Mika’s expression shifts. “It was a long time ago. Does it even matter now?”

“Of course it matters,” Shu replies sharply. “No one truly knows what became of them after the former king’s decree. Entire bloodlines vanished. I cannot help but wonder if something was omitted—some detail left behind.” He hesitates. “Perhaps there is a trace, a clue that might lead me to others like you.”

Mika’s voice lowers. “Am I not enough?”

Shu tenses. He looks up fully this time, taking in Mika’s face, the frown and the way his shoulders draw inward.

“Why are you so certain you are about to be replaced?” Shu asks quietly. “First Rei, now this. Mika… I have no intention of discarding you.”

“But you want to find more of my kind.”

“For knowledge,” Shu corrects. “And for justice.” He closes the book slowly. “Your banishment was senseless. Even now, the current king seems inconsistent. Word of you has spread. If he wished to seize you, he would have. Yet he has not.”

Mika looks unconvinced. Shu’s voice softens. “No matter what I uncover,” he says, reaching out to brush his fingers against Mika’s sleeve, “you are singular to me. There may be others in this world, but that does not diminish you. You are not a placeholder.”

The kitten mewls at Mika’s feet. Mika glances down at it, then back at Shu.

“…You promise?”

“Yes,” he says. “I promise.”

—

It feels as though something is unfolding beyond Shu’s reach.

He has been summoned to the sea keep before… his grandsire has exaggerated illness more than once, but usually the old man makes a point of monopolizing his time once he arrives. Now, he is nowhere to be found.

Shu has asked the maids, the knights on watch, even a passing child. No one has seen him since morning. Even Mika cannot track him.

“I can’t smell him anywhere,” Mika mutters, adjusting the small kitten in his arms as it mewls at him. “I think he’s getting hungry.”

“We will fetch him something from the kitchens,” Shu replies. “Usually there is fresh fish brought in at dawn.”

“Will we go to the sea soon?” Mika asks as they walk.

“Tomorrow, perhaps,” Shu answers, though his thoughts are elsewhere. He keeps a hand wrapped around Mika’s arm as they pass a row of studies—and then he stops as he hears voices in one of the rooms.

It’s unmistakable. His grandsire and Rei—what is he doing here?

“Is that—” Mika begins.

“Hush,” Shu whispers sharply, drawing him closer to the wall just beyond the doorway.

Inside, Rei speaks in a low, measured tone.

“No. No one else knows he is here. I have ensured it. Only I, his sister, and you are aware of his harbor. And the boy, of course—ah… should I call him that? Or shifter? The word feels rather inelegant.”

“It is what he is,” his grandsire replies evenly.

“Yes,” Rei concedes softly. “I suppose it is.”

Shu’s pulse begins to pound in his ears. The kitten squirms in Mika’s grasp and suddenly lets out a loud string of meows.

The voices inside cease at once. Shu does not wait to hear more.

He turns abruptly, pulling Mika along with him down the corridor.

“What were they talking about?” Mika asks.

“I don’t know,” Shu answers, too quickly. He doesn’t slow his pace. “I don’t know,” he repeats, quieter now. His mind is racing.

“We will feed the kitten,” Shu says, his voice tight. “And then we will return to our rooms.”

—

“Master…”

Mika sits at the edge of the bed, hands folded tightly in his lap.

“I don’t like it when ya pace like this,” he says quietly. “I haven’t seen ya this anxious in so long. I don’t understand…”

“You and I both,” Shu replies, sharper than he means to. He stops at the far wall, then turns again. “I will question him.”

“Why is Rei here?” Mika presses. “Why won’t anyone tell you anything?”

Shu exhales through his nose. The repetitive questions from Mika grates, though he knows it isn’t malicious. He moves again, fingers brushing his lips, then his chin.

“We will go to the sea tomorrow morning,” he adds abruptly. “Bright and early.”

Mika frowns. “Nn… but—”

“Don’t you want to go?”

Please, say yes, I need a distraction, Shu thinks.

Mika nods slowly. “I do…”

Shu approaches the bed at last, looming slightly as he looks down at him.

“For supper,” he says carefully, “I want you to remain here. I will have food brought to you.”

Mika’s expression changes instantly.

“No,” he says, surging forward and wrapping his arms around Shu’s waist. “No, you can’t.”

“It won’t not be long,” Shu says, though his hand comes to rest against Mika’s back almost instinctively. “An hour, perhaps less.”

Mika tightens his grip. “…Don’t leave me here alone.”

The words land harder than Shu expects. If this were any other evening, he would refuse the display outright. Mika is not a child to cling to his robes.

“If I am to ask questions,” Shu says quietly, “I cannot do so with you at my side. I worry they will guard their words.”

Mika presses his face against Shu’s chest. “If you don’t come back—”

“Calm down” Shu interrupts, cupping the back of his head. “I will return, and when I do, I will tell you everything.”

Even if I don’t like what I learn.

—

“Rei was here,” Shu says evenly. “I heard him.”

His grandsire exhales through his nose, chewing slowly. “I told that boy to exercise more discretion.”

“So?” the old man continues. “What do you make of it? You are an awfully perceptive young man.” There isn’t any mockery in his tone, only pure expectation.

“Something has gone wrong,” Shu replies. “It concerns Mika. And me. Is the King finally seeking him out?”

His grandsire studies him for a long moment before answering. “Mika,” he says carefully, “is a rather… unique case.”

“And?” Shu presses.

“There has been inquiry into his lineage.”

Shu’s brow furrows. “What lineage?”

“The crown is curious whether the boy may be connected to the Tenshouin line.”

“Ha! That is absurd,” Shu laughs, sharp and incredulous. “Truly? That is the concern? They suspect a half-starved crow from the outskirts of nowhere to be royal blood?” His voice rises despite himself. “He does not remember his parents. He bears no resemblance to the royal house… This is a pretense! They simply wish to claim a shifter, which they cannot.” His hands curl against the table. “He chose me, it’s not as if I seized him.”

His grandsire watches him carefully. “You love him very much,” he says. “I have rarely seen you raise your voice,” the old man continues. “Not since you learned to speak. Even as a child, you were composed.”

Heat floods Shu’s face. He realizes he is standing and slowly lowers himself back into his chair, gaze fixed on his untouched plate.

“I do,” he says at last.

“Rei came to me when he learned of the inquiry,” his grandsire says. “I am one of the last men in this country who remembers the old laws regarding shifters. He thought I should know.”

“Why?” Shu asks quietly. “Rei frightened me when I was a child, we’re hardly acquaintances. Why does he concern himself with what becomes of us?”

A soft smile touches the old man’s mouth. “The half-blood in him perhaps seeks balance. He believes that if the suspicion regarding Mika’s blood proves true, the King may act rashly.”

“Rashly…?” Shu repeats.

“Banishment at best,” his grandsire says plainly. “Execution at worst.”

“He will not,” Shu says immediately. “I will not allow it.”

“You are nineteen,” his grandsire replies gently. “Certainly not omnipotent.”

“Then why tell me now?” Shu demands. “If you intended to hide this from me?”

The old man speaks with a weary sigh, “I told the court you were visiting out of filial obligation,” he continues. “Rei ensured the inquiry would not escalate while you remained here. The sea keep is… inconveniently distant from

royal oversight."

"You brought me here to conceal us," Shu realizes.

"Yes."

"…And you intended to keep me ignorant."

"I intended to keep you safe," the old man corrects.

Shu's jaw tightens. "I may be young," he says carefully, "but I am not a child to be shuffled about for my own good. If the King questions Mika's blood, then I have the right to know the extent of that suspicion."

"And what will you do with that knowledge?" his grandsire asks quietly.

—

Shu does not tell Mika what he learned. He considers it, but ultimately decides not to. Whether it is protection or cowardice, he doesn't permit himself to dwell on the distinction.

When he returns, Mika is already asleep. Curled beneath the covers, the kitten tucked near his pillow. Shu stands there for a moment, then he retreats to the adjoining room.

He does not sleep. He lies awake for hours, his thoughts circling endlessly. He remains so still that eventually his limbs begin to buzz unpleasantly. He turns onto his side. Then onto his back. Sleep refuses him.

Eventually the sun rises, and the door opens.

"Master—" Mika's voice is hoarse. "Master, I thought ya— Ngh, *Shu*—!"

Shu sits up sharply, pulled from his thoughts. "What's wrong?"

Mika stands there, eyes bloodshot. "I thought ya'd be there when I woke up. I didn't even think to check the other room… Nn… I was crying for no reason, right?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't want to wake you."

Mika climbs onto the bed without waiting. "Did you learn anything?"

Shu's expression doesn't change. "We can discuss it later." *Or not at all.*

"You said we'd go to the sea today."

"Ah… yes. I did." He rubs at his eyes. He is exhausted, but wired. "I'll be up in a moment—"

"You look tired," Mika interrupts quietly. "Sometimes when you feel a certain way, it's like I can sense it too. Like part of me feels it."

"…Are you certain you are not simply tired yourself?" Shu asks, skeptical.

"*Mmm*. No. I slept." He slips beneath the sheets. "I'll stay here, if it helps."

Shu takes a slow breath. He gathers Mika into his arms. With him held close and safe, the tension in his chest eases enough that, finally, sleep comes.

—

A sharp whistle cuts through the morning air. "Lovebirds. Isn't it about time you got up?"

Sunlight floods the room as the curtains are pulled aside. Mika groans, pressing his face into Shu's chest, curling tighter against him. Shu squints against the sudden brightness.

"Rei…?" he mumbles, sitting up.

Rei stands beside the bed casually, as though entering a room uninvited is ordinary.

"Your grandsire told me you figured things out," Rei says, "and that was rather quick. Though I'm not surprised. You've always been sharp for your age. It is past noon, however. Leisure is one thing, but not at the expense of the day. I for one may not be the best example of that, however… Perhaps I am a hypocrite. But I am feeling particularly lively today! The sea does us all well, it seems."

"Who allowed you in here…" Shu mutters, disentangling himself carefully. Mika immediately curls back into the covers. Shu glances at him, his hand resting protectively over the other's small form.

"You would be surprised how easily people are persuaded by my charms," Rei answers, faint amusement in his voice.

"…You bribed the maids?" Shu snaps.

Rei chuckles. "Ah, that was a joke. Your grandsire asked me to check on you. He was concerned you had gone astray."

"Where would I run to?" Shu mutters under his breath.

Rei's gaze flicks to Mika without a word. Shu rises, smoothing his clothes, though his body remains tense. "Excuse us. I should get dressed."

"Of course," Rei says. "Meet me in the gardens when you are ready. We shall walk to the shore."

Shu hesitates. "May I bring—?"

"Yes," Rei replies without looking back. "If I request your company, I expect the little one will come as well. Don't misinterpret my intent."

And just like that, he leaves.

—

Mika strays ahead on the path toward the beach, his boots sinking into the sand. Rei remains near Shu's side, his hands tucked into his cloak. The wind cuts through the heat of the day. Shu closes his eyes briefly, letting it wash over him.

"Have you told him?" Rei asks, nodding toward Mika.

Shu watches Mika for a moment before shaking his head.

"I don't know what to say," he admits quietly. "How do you tell someone the crown suspects he has royal blood? Let alone someone like him… I worry he won't understand. Or worse, that he will."

"I think lying to him is worse," Rei replies, but his tone is nonjudgmental.

"I'm not lying," Shu says sharply. "I'm withholding information."

Rei hums. "And what do you think he will do? Fly to the capital on his own? He is tied to you, however that bond manifests. I cannot shift myself—I am only a quarter-blood—but even I feel the pull toward those I choose."

"That isn't what concerns me," Shu lies through his teeth.

Rei slows, looking at him properly now. "Shu. Are you lying to me as well?"

Shu huffs in irritation and quickens his pace, closing the distance between himself and Mika. He catches the boy's arm, more firmly than usual.

Mika stumbles slightly in the sand. "Nn? What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Shu says, though his grip doesn't loosen. "Just… don't go anywhere."

Mika tilts his head. "I'm not. Why would I?"

"If you ever feel tempted," Shu says quietly, "tell me first. At least say goodbye."

"Master," Mika replies without hesitation, "I'm not leavin'. Ever."

The waves crash ahead of them, loud and constant. The sea stretches wide and open, seagulls cutting across the sky.

"*Ahh*— wow. I want—"

"Does the little bird wish to swim?" Rei asks, approaching from behind.

"Mm-mm. I want to," Mika says eagerly.

"Well, no one is stopping you," Rei hums. "Though the tide is rough today. Shu, perhaps you should accompany him."

"What?" Shu says flatly. "Absolutely not. I'm not ruining my clothes."

Mika grabs his hand and pulls. "Let's swim naked."

"Mi— Mika— Rei is—"

Rei laughs lightly. "I assure you, I have seen more scandal than either of you could conceive."

Shu closes his eyes in humiliation.

Mika takes Shu's hand and pulls him closer to the water. He lets go and begins stripping out of his layers without hesitation. Rei settles onto a large piece of driftwood, unbothered, watching them with idle interest. Shu grows more suspicious of him by the second.

"Let me help you—"

"I've got it," Shu says quickly, nudging Mika's hands away from his cloak. He removes it himself and lays it carefully on the sand, stacking the rest of his clothes neatly on top to keep them clean, all the while shaking his head in disdain.

The wind cuts through him despite the scorching heat of the sun. Shu folds his arms briefly, staring down at his undergarments. Perhaps he can leave those on.

Mika is already bare. "Master—"

"Mika," Shu huffs in warning.

Mika shrugs. "Leave them on, then. I'm sure they'll be fine."

"Why are you so determined to swim?" Shu mutters, though his words are lost to the waves.

He steps forward cautiously, dipping his toes into the water and immediately shivering. Mika is already wading in, up to his waist.

Shu stiffens. "Mika, can you even swim?"

"Ngah… I think so…?"

"No— wait," Shu snaps, hurrying in after him. The cold bites at his skin, stealing his breath. The fabric clinging to his legs only makes it worse. He doesn't care. He catches Mika's arm once they're waist-deep, holding on firmly.

"It feels niceeeee," Mika hums, easing lower into the water.

"It's freezing," Shu retorts, watching him drop to his knees.

"I won't go farther than this," Mika promises. He reaches up from the water and grips Shu's waist, fingers shockingly cold. "Master, get on your knees."

"I'd prefer to hear that phrase in almost any other context," Shu mutters, but he complies.

He lowers himself slowly until he's kneeling too, the water rising to his shoulders. The waves roll around them, tugging gently at their balance. Shu glances toward the shore.

Rei is no longer on the driftwood. He scans the beach, but there's no sign of him.

"…Where did he—"

"I don't know. Who cares," Mika says lightly, looping his arms around Shu's shoulders and pulling him closer. The movement of his body dragging against him beneath the water is distracting.

"I worry he's up to something," Shu says, tightening his hold around Mika's waist as another wave passes.

"Who? Rei?" Mika tilts his head. He leans in, brushing his mouth against Shu's neck where the salt water has soaked his skin. "I saw him walk off that way, I think…"

"You *think?*" Shu narrows his eyes. "Are you inventing answers so I stop worrying?"

"…You used to do that to me."

"That is an exaggeration. I told you a white lie once or twice."

"Well, I really did see him," Mika insists. Then quieter: "I don't really like Rei, Master. But not because I think he's bad. I think he likes you."

Shu flushes and sinks lower into the water. "He does not *like* me. He enjoys teasing people, that is entirely different. Besides, what do you know about him?"

"He's a quarter-blood, right?"

"…Yes. I fail to see the relevance—"

"It's strange," Mika says slowly. "But I can tell that his intentions are pure. Maybe it's just intuition, but with him, it feels stronger than that."

A wave lifts them both; Mika steadies himself against Shu's shoulders.

"Even if he's questionable, I don't want ya worryin' about him," Mika adds softly. "Don't get distracted."

Shu exhales. He reaches up and pushes Mika's wet hair back from his forehead.

"I have something I need to tell you."

"Oh. What is it?"

Shu hesitates, but recalls Rei's advice. "I spoke with my grandsire last night."

Mika's expression shifts. "Ya said we'd discuss it later… is this later?"

He nods. "The crown suspects you may have royal blood in your lineage," Shu continues. "They are searching. For you, for us. That is all I know."

Mika goes rigid in his arms, but he does not pull away nor does he try to run. He closes his eyes for a brief moment, something solemn crossing his face. Then, he looks up and speaks to the sky:

"…I didn't want to tell you."

Chapter 2 (http://archiveofourown.org/works/80032311/chapters/210197386)

Notes:

added tags: switching
this fic will include switch shmk so if that bothers you dont read it.

ahhh i hate when i get ideas cause i barely sleep
my google docs has 7hrs screen time right now...and that doesn't even include me writing on my laptop LMAO

(See the end of the chapter for more notes (#chapter_2_endnotes).)

Shu's head aches. He buries it deeper into the pillow, hoping the pressure will dull it, but it doesn't help at all.

"I brought ya some tea…"

"Hhnn…" Shu grumbles, "thank you, Mika."

"You've never had a headache like this. Do ya know what caused it?"

"Stress?" Shu suggests softly, sitting up slowly. "Can you shut the curtains? The light hurts…"

Mika scrambles to the window, drawing the curtains closed quickly. The room darkens, light spilling inside just enough to see the tea cup. Shu lifts it to his lips, hands trembling.

Ever since they visited the sea, Shu has been suspicious of everyone. Even Mika hasn't escaped it. He feels guilty for even thinking such a thing, but he can't stop recalling Mika's confession. The moment replays in his head, and when it does it makes his heart race.

"I didn't want to tell you…"
"Tell me what?"
"My momma, she is… Shu, she was the exiled princess. Do you remember?"

Shu remembered instantly.

He had read about her in history books… Every scandal, every punishment inflicted upon her for bearing a child with a crow-shifter. Even as a preteen, reading about it had made him pity her. Women's lives were always more precarious no matter what…

The memory makes his hands shake as he lifts the cup again. Mika leans close, and Shu leans back slightly, meeting his gaze. Mika frowns.

"Sorry… I'll go back to my bed."

"N- no, Mika," Shu sets the cup down. "It's not that I… I'm just uneasy. I'm sorry… come here."

He doesn't think Mika lied out of malice. He was only trying to protect himself, or he believed that it didn't matter.

Not until Shu told him about their situation. The admission came naturally, he told him immediately—So why does he feel so shaken by it? Because it makes the situation all the more real, perhaps?

"Master, ya should sleep. That's supposed to help, right?"

"I'm not tired. I can't sleep." He's exhausted, but his mind won't rest. "…Will you lay with me please?"

"Mkay," Mika crawls into bed. Neither of them have changed into their day clothes despite the hour.

Shu hesitates, his arms hovering over Mika's waist. "…H- hold me?"

Mika doesn't say anything. He wraps Shu tightly in his arms. Shu buries his face in Mika's chest, willing the headache and his thoughts to cease.

—

"Rei."

"You've been holed up for days. I was starting to wonder if you were alright."

"I'm fine," Shu says, taking a seat at the table. "Where's my grandsire?"

"Drinking in his study. I imagine he assumed you wouldn't be out for dinner."

A few seconds later, Mika enters, a piece of cinnamon-sugar bread halfway to his mouth. He freezes at the sight of Rei, then relaxes and slides into his chair.

"Why are you spoiling your supper?" Shu scolds. "Hand that over—"

Mika leans so far out of reach he nearly tips his chair. "*Nn*, no! I don't want meat anyway. Just let me eat this…"

"You two are quite the pair. It's very entertaining." Rei smirks.

Shu shakes his head and sighs, conceding. Mika devours the first piece of bread, then produces a second from his pocket and starts eating again.

"Are you going to tell me why you stayed in bed all this time? Did you catch a chill at the sea? I know the water was cold, but the day was warm enough to swim safely."

"It's none of your business," Shu replies, sharper than he intends. He hesitates… does he even want to confirm what the crown is suspicious of? He's suspicious of Rei…

Mika chimes in. "Master needed a few days to himself, that's all."

"To himself, you say. And yet… I didn't see a wink of you, little bird."

Mika stuffs another bite into his mouth, silent.

"Well, I'm glad you're alright. You even turned down the maids."

"I've no use for maids anyway," Shu mutters.

"No? You clean your own quarters?"

"If need be, I manage just fine on my own."

Ironically, the maids bring out their dinner. Shu picks at his plate slowly, lost in thought, while Rei contentedly devours his steak. Mika ignores his plate, focused on finishing his bread.

"You have to eat properly if you want to grow."

"Mm, you already said I'm almost too big for you to lift me…"

"So?" Shu scowls. "That shouldn't stop you. Imagine—maybe one day you'll be able to lift me instead."

Mika freezes mid-bite, his eyes widening as if the thought strikes him. Then he begins to eat, clearly entertained by the idea. Rei laughs across the table.

Shu manages a single bite, chewing and swallowing at a snail's pace. His eyes flick to Rei.

"Where did you go that day?" he asks, pressing for an answer.

"I felt as if I were invading your privacy," Rei replies. "So I walked back."

"Really?" Shu leans forward, suspicion heavy in his voice. "Is that really all?"

"You're suspicious of me, which is understandable," Rei says, unruffled. "But you must know by now, I would've told the crown Mika was here if I were a spy… or whatever it is you imagine me to be. My interest in this situation might confuse you. I do enjoy meddling from time to time, but this concerns me and my family, or at least

what remains of it. I want to preserve what I can of them, even if they're distant."

"…Mika is only half-blood," Shu states flatly.

"How long can he shift for?" Rei asks, not missing a beat.

"One hour," Mika answers for himself. "Two, tops. The older I get, the easier it is, but past that, it hurts…"

Rei hums thoughtfully. "Interesting…" He trails off, his food long forgotten. "So the rumors are true, then. You do have royal blood?"

"I didn't say that," Mika counters, glancing at Shu with eyes that silently ask permission. Shu gives a small nod. "…Yes."

Rei laughs. "You've raised a good liar, Shu! I almost believed him." He stabs his steak again, eyes filled with amusement. "Then… who are your parents?"

Shu stands abruptly, a sharp motion that startles Mika. He grips Mika's shoulder firmly, guiding him up with him as well. "We'll continue this conversation another time."

Rei sighs, leaning back in his chair. "Ah, my curiosity can wait, I suppose… Just don't disappear for three more days, Shu."

—

"Why are there guests? I thought no one visited the keep."

"No one does, so I'm unsure. But we'll stay here unless someone calls us." Shu glances out the window at the carriage just beyond the gates. It's too far to make out any sigils, there's nothing recognizable. That's almost a relief. From this distance, he would have seen the blaring white-feathered banner of the crown.

"I'm nervous," Mika mumbles behind him.

"Don't be. Surely it's nothing." Shu returns to the desk, eyes flicking to the letter sprawled across it. He had received it a day ago from Kanata, a lord his age he remembers from childhood.

"Can I read it?" Mika asks for the third time.

"It's nothing of note," Shu replies. "He's simply wishing me well, and says to contact him if I need anything. Though… It is strange. Has word already spread that far?"

"I've heard of him. That name sounds familiar."

"Yes. His family is very powerful. Most were believed friends of the gods hundreds of years ago, though that notion has faded. He's a lord already, but my age," Shu explains. "He lives on an island, far from here."

"An island? I wonder what that's like…"

"Enjoyable, probably. Nobody can bother him." Shu's gaze returns to the window. The quiet outside soothes him slightly.

"I don't like sitting here, Master. I feel like a sitting duck." Mika frowns.

By evening, the carriage is gone. Shu leaves Mika in bed and ventures out to inquire further. Almost immediately, he runs into his grandsire.

"Shu! I was coming to see you," he says cheerfully, which must be good news. "Rei's little brother has come to stay. Do you remember him?"

Confusion flickers over Shu's face. "…Perhaps… I do, a little."

"They look very similar. Honestly, you probably have memories of them confused. Well, supper will be ready soon. Will you be joining us?"

Shu nods, glancing down the hall. "Yes."

—

At dinner, Shu doesn't recognize Rei's little brother… At least, not entirely. He looks like Rei, just smaller, his hair cut short and his outfit less mature. His eyes are just as red, his face just as sharp. He eats much like Rei does, but sits at a distance, as if proximity would be embarrassing. Shu can't blame him; Rei seems like trouble most of the time.

Mika sits down and lazily picks at his food, but Shu notices something odd. He keeps glancing at Ritsu, and Ritsu keeps looking back.

Shu gives Mika a gentle nudge when he catches him staring for the fifth time.

"Sorry," Mika mutters, dragging a vegetable across his plate.

Suddenly, Ritsu's voice draws attention from across the table. "I recognize you," he says to Mika.

"*Ngah*—what…?"

"In the garden! Ah, no one believed me!"

“Ritsu—“ Rei’s voice cuts in sharply.

“I told you! I told you about the shape-shifting crow in the garden when I was a boy, brother. But everyone thought I was insane.”

Shu’s eyes narrow, first on Ritsu, then on Mika. The boy looks guilty, cowering slightly, hands fidgeting in his lap.

“Now that you mention it… I do remember that story,” Rei says, his tone softer. “We all thought it was your unique imagination…”

“Well, he’s sitting right there. Mikarin, you hardly look any different—“

“I don’t know what yer talkin’ about.”

Ritsu's eyes widen. “But… you speak the same!”

Shu glances between them. Is Mika lying again? Not that it matters. If he was hiding in the Sakumas’ garden, it’s near where Shu first found him on the road.

Mika nudges his plate away. “Master, I’m finished.”

“You hardly ate anything.”

Ritsu keeps speaking, insistent, the room somehow louder even though it’s only him who’s speaking. “Why won’t you say anything? Are you embarrassed? You shouldn’t be. It’s fine.”

“Embarrassed of what?” Rei asks, frowning.

“Living in a garden… like some… animal? People think weird things about shifters, you know.” His words ring with childish bluntness. Shu can’t blame him. He wasn’t like that as a child, but his brothers spoke their minds without thought. Even Rei seems unsettled.

“Forgive me. We’ll be turning in for the night,” Shu says, standing.

Shu doesn’t bring it up again until Mika is in the tub, with the maids excused and Shu taking their place instead. He scrubs Mika’s leg idly, having already washed the rest of him and himself—he’s wrapped in a towel and a robe.

“…Was what Ritsu said true?”

Mika shrugs. “Course… What other shapeshiftin’ crow would be in their garden? And he calls me by a nickname.”

“’Mikarin,’” Shu murmurs, testing the sound on his tongue. “I suppose the world is smaller than I imagined. Do you remember how you ended up there?”

“Um… not really. It was so long ago… I think I was eight or nine.” Mika shrugs again. “I probably wandered out of town and smelled their food. They had a lot of strawberries and Ritsu… he’s like his brother? Wanders at night? He found me, and he started to bring me things, and… I shifted to impress him. Then he ran inside to tell everyone, so I didn’t go back.”

Shu hums. “A wise decision… though I do wonder what the Sakumas would have done, being as they are. Perhaps you’d still be there.”

“No… I don’t want to think about that.” Mika’s voice is soft, barely above a whisper. “I like being with you now.”

Shu sighs softly and leans forward, resting his head on Mika’s shoulder. “It’s a pain the tub’s so small… otherwise, I’d join you.”

“You could probably squeeze in…” Mika says, hopeful, even though it’s impossible.

Shu laughs softly. There’s no way it would be comfortable. Wordlessly, he reaches down Mika’s leg, cleaning him with careful, methodical movements. When he reaches Mika’s foot, Mika holds back laughter, toes curling as the gentle attention tickles him.

“Ah, I’m not done, stay still,” Shu murmurs.

“Nn, Master—“

The door swings open, and a maid steps in with a clean, warmed towel.

“I-I’m sorry!” she squeaks, her eyes widening at the sight, and she drops the towels hastily nearby before scuttling out.

“Ngah,” Mika mumbles, “we weren’t even doing anythin’ bad…”

Shu slides his other hand up Mika’s leg into the warm water, smiling. “I suppose no one else will be interrupting us now.”

“I hope so,” Mika breathes.

“Let’s get you out before the water grows cold.”

Mika lets out a soft protest, but the bath’s comfort is fleeting anyway, the water is barely lukewarm. Shu helps him up gently, wrapping him in a towel, hand in hand as he guides him out and dries him off.

Mika rises onto his toes, aiming for Shu’s lips, missing by an inch and kissing the side of his mouth anyway. Shu turns, meeting him in a gentle kiss. Frenzied as they both may feel, Shu doesn’t like to rush.

He wraps a hand around Mika’s waist. “Bed,” he murmurs against his mouth. Mika takes his wrist, leading him

back to the bedroom.

"I wanna do it tonight," Mika murmurs, pressing a kiss to Shu before slipping behind him and nudging him against the bed. Shu exhales softly as he lands on his rear, bouncing slightly. Mika doesn't have to be explicit, Shu knows what he means, but still..

"Are you sure?"

"Mm, why wouldn't I be?"

"If it's not… up to par?"

"You've only let me three times. Every time I've liked it more 'n more."

Shu hesitates. He guards his control everywhere, even in bed. And being with Mika like this makes him lose it, every time. Lately, everything feels out of control, and the idea of surrendering in bed too… It terrifies him. But this… this would be his choice. He would do it willingly, and that thought steadies him.

He lets his robes fall open, exposing himself completely.

"Ahh," Mika hums, biting his lip as he steps closer, lowering himself over Shu. His eyes, so distracting, stare Shu down like a piece of prey. The intensity makes Shu shiver, and makes him feel their bond in a way nothing else ever could.

"Shu…" Mika whispers his name. He drags a hand down Shu's stomach, pressing into the dip of his navel as if searching for something beneath his skin. It feels strange and Shu tenses, sucking in a breath. He slides his hand up Shu's torso, then stops over his heart, where he can no doubt feel it racing beneath his palm. Mika stares at his palm, and then meets Shu's gaze.

"Don't make me wait too long," Shu pants. "I might change my mind."

"There's no way…" Mika murmurs.

His hand spreads out across Shu's chest. "D'ya have stuff in here?" He glances toward the desk and the large dresser.

"There's oil on the desk," Shu says, frustrated that the moment is cut short as Mika leaves him to grab it. He wishes he had stuffed it in his robe pocket. For a brief second, he feels abandoned, placing his hand on his chest as if it could replace him.

Mika returns quickly, setting the vile in the bed in reach.

"Sorry, 'm back…"

Mika bends down and kisses him again, this time more earnestly, pushing his tongue into Shu's mouth with obscene intensity.

"You should… move like this…" Mika mumbles, grabbing Shu's thigh and lifting his legs. Shu doesn't understand initially, but as he scoots further up the bed, he realizes what Mika wants. Then, Mika slides up against him, their lengths flush with one another for a moment. He turns and pulls Shu closer, hiking his leg over his own hip. The position seems difficult, but then Mika's cock prods between his legs. It's doable.

"I want… to be closer, like this," Mika mumbles between kisses, "Is it okay?"

Shu shifts his thigh against Mika's hip. He feels exposed, even though his legs aren't far apart. He nods.

"Master, 's really charmin' like this…"

"Hah," Shu huffs softly, embarrassed.

Mika reaches behind him, finds the vile, opens it, and pours the liquid into his hand. It drips on the sheets, and Shu frowns.

Mika reaches between Shu's legs. He shifts down a bit further and mouths at Shu's chest, his tongue dragging across one hardened nipple as his fingers search for what he's looking for—when he finds it, he slips two fingers inside of Shu at once.

Shu's taken him before, so it's not entirely new, and yet his body resists. He tenses up. Mika licks his chest again.

"Don't do that," Mika says. "Let me in…" His plea falls on deaf ears. Shu's blood rushes to his head. He tries to relax… Mika's fingers make it past the first knuckle, and Shu shakes his head, his eyes closed tight.

"Mika," Shu breathes, grabbing his wrist.

Mika's hand stills. "Are ya okay?"

"Let's… uh, let's do something." Shu doesn't dare look at Mika's face, humiliated by his own hesitation. He can't look Mika in the eyes.

Mika withdraws his fingers as Shu lifts his leg, pulling away.

Mika slips back up, and then reaches behind himself. Shu finally looks at him, and Mika blinks,

"Don't worry, I'll let ya put it in me."

"That's—unsanitary," Shu scolds, but Mika is already positioning himself. Shu pants, overtly aware of the wet, weird sensation between his legs. He wishes he could bathe again.

He feels guilty.

"Master," Mika says, licking his lips. "Ya look sad… Nn, don't be, please?" His arm twitches. He shoves his forehead against Shu's chest, "…Help me…" he begs.

Shu moves slowly, wrapping his arm around Mika and guiding his hand down. He slides his hand along Mika's wrist until he finds his entrance, where two fingers are shoved inside of him to the hilt.

"'S ready," Mika says, slurring his words. Shu holds him close, but Mika gives him a soft push. He slips his fingers out, and crawls on top of Shu. "See? 'S fine, I don't mind doin' all the work too… s'long as I…" Mika trails off with a soft moan, rubbing himself along Shu's cock. He grabs it, and positions it where he needs it to be.

Shu's hands press stiffly into Mika's thighs. His fingers curled, he stares up at Mika, dazed… Perhaps he's relinquished control after all.

Mika sinks down on him all at once. His mouth parts in a silent gasp, and he braces his hands on Shu's chest. "Uh—ugh, *god*—"

Mika is so warm inside, but he tries to focus elsewhere. "Is it… Are you okay?"

"'S so deep," Mika moans. "Yer all the way in me—all the way…"

Mika sits back, his small frame bending, and Shu notices the faintest bulge in his stomach. It makes his hips twitch, and Mika cries out at the sudden movement, his cock weeping against his stomach.

"Nn, master, fill me up, please," Mika pleads. "I wanna, nn—"

Mika whines, moving his hips, clearly overwhelmed. Shu is hesitant to move. He already feels like he might burst.

He grabs Mika's hips, pressing his thumbs into the bone there, and gently rocks up into him. Mika lets out a soft, pleased sound. He leans forward, practically collapsing onto Shu's chest. He buries his face in Shu's shoulder, mouthing at his collarbone.

"Mika," Shu says softly, "you're too good to me, I'm sorry—" he huffs, his hips shifting. Mika says nothing; Shu isn't even sure if he's listening. "I'll give you what you want one day, for now—I hope this is enough."

Shu continues for no more than five minutes, each of his thrusts deep and purposeful. He fills Mika as requested, but even then, he feels like he hasn't fully satisfied him. Mika's hand slips beneath himself, jerking off and spilling onto Shu's stomach, making a mess. He doesn't move off Shu, keeping him inside, and Shu, exhausted from the weight of it all, finally drifts into sleep.

He wakes at some point in the night, a hazy, strange dream lingering at the edge of his mind. As he moves, he realizes he's still buried inside Mika. Thankfully, the oil hasn't dried… but he grimaces.

Mika whines in his sleep as he pulls out. Shu rolls from the bed, retrieves a wet towel, and returns to clean up their mess. Mika doesn't stir, barely moving, a tiny smile playing on his lips as Shu wipes him. Clearly, he's dreaming of something pleasant.

Once he's cleaned himself, Shu wraps himself in a robe and sits at the desk. His gaze falls on the letter, untouched.

Living on an island… that would be nice. Perhaps a true escape, for once. He would take Mika anywhere, just to get away from all of this, even if only for a short while.

—

Shu wakes the next morning… Or rather, around noon, to find the bed empty, devoid of any company. It unnerves him. He doesn't even dress properly before he scours the keep, searching for Mika.

He finds him in one of the studies, accompanied by Ritsu and Rei, and the kitten Mika has taken a liking to.

"I think if I were a shifter, I'd look something like this. What do you think, brother?" Ritsu asks, holding up the tiny black creature.

Rei glances at him. "…You're more like a bear cub."

Ritsu deflates at that.

Mika laughs softly. "I think you'd make a cute kitten, Ritsu."

"Mm, thanks Mikarin—oh, look who finally decided to wake up!"

Shu wraps his robes tighter around himself. Mika turns to face him, seated on the floor.

"Why didn't you wake me up?" Shu asks, his tone sharp.

"Well, ya haven't been sleepin' very often…" Mika replies.

"You could have left a note… or something." His heart is racing. "I thought… Never mind. I'm going to get dressed."

Shu turns on his heels and storms back down the hall. Mika quickly follows, catching up with him. The door swings shut loudly.

"…Are you angry?" Mika asks softly. "I thought ya'd be happy I was talkin' to 'em without you around…"

"I'm not angry at all," Shu says honestly. "…With everything going on, I worried you might've been taken, or

worse. It's crossed my mind more times than I can count." He grabs his clothes and begins to dress himself.

"Oh," Mika says, sitting at the edge of the bed. "I'm sorry. I'll leave a note next time?"

"That'd be appreciated. Though I hope there won't be a next time. If I fall asleep at the desk, wake me up please? My neck is killing me…" he says, rubbing the back of it. "Still… I'm glad you are getting along with both of them. Especially Ritsu. It's good to have a friend."

"He's a bit younger than me, but he's nice. Though he says things randomly… like, he has no manners at all."

Shu laughs softly. "Most Sakuma's are like that."

—

A week passes.

Shu tells no one, but he writes back to Kanata and waits.

His original plan had been to return to the castle after a week, but of alas, that has changed. Knowing what is to come makes staying impossible. Ritsu and Rei remain guests at the keep, and Mika has grown fond of them both. He speaks to them more than Shu does himself. Shu tries not to let it bother him.

Still… he feels jealous sometimes. Watching Mika form connections so effortlessly, whilst Shu has always struggled to do the same.

It takes three days for a reply to arrive.

I'd love to have you as a guest. I'll send a ship to fetch you at the End Sea. Remember it?

At first, the name means nothing. Shu sits at his desk, quill resting against his lower lip, staring at the letter.

The End Sea?

Then it returns to him: the pier where he and Kanata first met. They were both children. Kanata had called it that because it was the furthest stretch of mainland he had ever traveled from his home island.

Now comes the difficult part. telling Mika that they're leaving. And Mika has only just begun to build something here.

Shu folds the letter carefully and goes to find him.

Mika is in the reading room with the kitten, Ritsu sipping tea nearby. Rei is absent, which is good. One less nosy brother to worry about.

"Mika, I need to speak with you," Shu says. Ritsu lifts his head. "Privately," Shu adds.

He fixes Ritsu with a steady stare until the boy understands and rises with exaggerated patience, tea in hand. For all his petulance, he knows when to respect boundaries.

Mika sits up in the lounge chair. The kitten hops down and bats playfully at the edge of Shu's cloak. Shu gently pulls it away.

"What is it?" Mika asks, searching his face. "Is something wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," Shu reassures him. "In fact, it's good news. Do you remember the letter I received?"

"Yes… from Kanata."

"Yes." Shu nods. "He's invited us to stay with him, for as long as we like. He's sending a ship."

Mika stares up at him in silence. The kitten mewls at his feet.

"Why?" he asks at last.

"What do you mean, *why*? It's much safer for you there."

"I feel safe here."

Shu exhales. "In another week, the royal guard could descend upon this place if we remain. I won't endanger my grandsire, or the brothers."

"Is that really what ya think will happen?" Mika asks quietly. "Maybe yer bein' paranoid, Master. There hasn't been any sign of 'em."

"Have you looked?" Shu counters. "You can't believe everything Rei tells you. He wouldn't say something that might frighten you."

"So they *are* coming?"

"I…" Shu falters. "I don't know for certain. But—"

"I don't want to leave," Mika whispers.

"You can bring the kitten," Shu offers quickly. "You'll like it there. I promise. It's better than this place."

"Have you been?"

"Not personally," Shu admits. "But it's spoken of as an oasis. It's safe. The people are kind, they're familial. They'll take care of us."

"And if they come to the island?" Mika presses. "…What then?"

Shu hadn't thought that far ahead. The possibility sits heavy in his chest. He bites his lip. "Are you coming with me or not?"

"I have to go whether I want to or not!" Mika whines, frustration cracking through his voice. "I'd die here

without you, Master. I need to be at your side. That's what makes this worse… I don't have a choice, do I?"

Shu isn't sure whether his loyalty comforts him or frightens him.

—

Mika has shifted into his crow form and taken to hiding beneath the bed in protest while Shu packs.

"You can't stay that way forever, Mika."

The crow caws sharply in response.

Shu shakes his head to himself. He often forgets how childish Mika can be when he sets his mind to it… How he believes this is some meaningful act of rebellion, Shu has no idea. In another hour he'll be forced to crawl out and shift back anyway.

And, as expected, once an hour passes and Shu has finished packing their belongings, small talons scrape softly against the floorboards.

Mika emerges from beneath the bed, toeing out slowly before flapping his wings in clear frustration.

"Little crow," Shu sighs.

The bird hops once, indignant.

"I know you're angry. Truly, you have every right to be. Being plucked from place to place like this… it cannot be pleasant." Shu kneels, lowering himself to Mika's level. "But I promise you, one day we will find a home. And when we do, I will never make you leave it again."

He reaches forward carefully, brushing gentle fingers over glossy black feathers.

"For now…" his voice softens, "just trust me. All right?"

There is a sudden burst of energy, Shu flinches, sitting back as feathers seem to ripple and collapse inward. He shuts his eyes instinctively—and when he opens them, Mika is sitting there in front of him, human once more.

His expression is stubborn, but not cruel.

Shu sighs and reaches forward, patting him affectionately on the head.

"Get dressed. We need to leave before sunset."

Notes:

thank you for reading <<333
and... ive already started chaper 3...

Chapter 3 (http://archiveofourown.org/works/80032311/chapters/210438421)

Notes:

I really like how this chapter came out…! Also a longer note added at the end that'll explain some stuff

(See the end of the chapter for more notes (#chapter_3_endnotes).)

Shu had thought himself immune to seasickness.

The more the boat rocks, the more nauseous he feels. Thankfully, he hasn't actually retched… Though part of him almost wishes he would, just to get it over with. One of the men aboard guides him and Mika below deck, presses a small vial into his hand, and instructs him to rest.

Shu is suspicious, but he would rather not continue suffering, so he drinks it.

"Little crow… little c—"

Shu's eyes snap open.

His hand is resting on Mika's stomach, idly petting him. Mika is wide awake, staring down at him with a smug little grin.

Shu bolts upright. "Ah—how long was I asleep?"

"Quite a while. We're almost there," Mika replies. "What were ya dreamin' about?"

"I can't recall." And that's the truth.

"Still feel like yer gonna puke?" Mika asks. "Didn't know my Master was so sensitive…"

"You didn't?" Shu huffs. "Honestly, it feels as though everything has had a dreadful effect on me lately. The headaches… now this. I'm only nineteen… Am I already falling apart?"

"Ngah, no way." Mika rubs his back in slow circles. "Here. If ya pet him, it'll calm ya down."

He gently places the black kitten in Shu's lap. Shu had nearly forgotten they'd brought him. The kitten immediately curls into a small ball. Shu strokes its soft fur, feeling some of the tension leave his shoulders.

"I'm surprised you take the form of a crow," Shu muses, watching the kitten's tiny ears twitch. "And not something like this. Though… I suppose your human form isn't entirely dissimilar."

"Nn, ya think I look like a kitty?" Mika perks up.

"Yes. You behave like one," Shu says, leaning closer to scratch beneath Mika's chin in demonstration. "And you purr like one, too."

"Nhehe—" Mika sways under his touch, pleased. "Ahh… I wish we were there already…"

—

"Ngahhh, it's hot!"

"Indeed it is," Shu says as they step off the boat and onto a well-built dock. He clutches Mika's kitten to his chest. "We'll have to purchase clothes suited for this weather. I think I'll melt if I don't change into something lighter."

"What sort of clothes do they wear?"

"See for yourself," Shu says, gesturing ahead.

They pass shipmen who are shirtless, wearing nothing but loose trousers. The farther into the tiny town they walk, the wider Mika's eyes grow. Nearly everyone wears revealing clothing—at least far more revealing than what they're used to. No cloaks and hardly any proper sleeves, some even wear shorts.

Mika latches onto Shu's arm as they approach a larger crowd.

"I was told to meet someone at the gates," Shu says. "Just through here." He takes Mika's hand and leads him through the cluster of people. Heads turn, they're clearly outsiders.

Once they reach the gates, the crowd thins out. There is a brown-haired man waiting in front of them.

"Ah, Shu! Mika!" His voice is loud and almost grating. Even the kitten burrows deeper into Shu's robes.

"How was your trip? I hope the sea wasn't too rough! Of course, if you're not used to it, it can be quite the hassle, aha!"

"Master got seasick," Mika supplies.

"Do not…Ugh. It was fine. The trip went well," Shu corrects stiffly. "You are…?"

"Oh! Right, we haven't met. I've heard so much about you, it feels like I already know you. My name is Chiaki." He holds out his hand.

Shu hesitates, then shakes it. Mika follows suit, even though he seems unsure of the gesture.

"I am Kanata's sworn protector," Chiaki continues. "He rarely steps beyond the gates himself, so I was sent to fetch you. But don't worry—he is happily expecting you. Come!"

They follow him inside. The gardens are immaculate and vibrant, tropical flowers blooming in bright clusters. The greenery is so vivid it almost hurts Shu's eyes. Everything is pristine.

They approach the temple ahead. Unlike the castles Shu is accustomed to, this structure is of a particular style. The Shinkais are among the few in the kingdom who still properly worship the gods. The temple reflects that devotion, and even though it's hundreds of years old, it looks remarkably well maintained.

Mika shivers as they climb the steps. He pinches Shu's sleeve.

"I feel—"

"What's wrong?"

"You two, don't fall behind," Chiaki calls from above.

"You should have eaten something before we left. It's probably that."

"Nn, Master, my…"

Mika's grip loosens, and he collapses.

"I'm sure it's nothing… he likely overexerted himself, and the heat doesn't help. Ah, I'm terribly sorry… What a way to arrive."

"Don't apologize, Shu," Kanata says gently, lowering himself to kneel beside Mika. "The poor boy… he must be tired. Let him rest." He strokes Mika's hair as if he were one of his own.

"I appreciate it," Shu replies. "And thank you for the clothing as well."

"Of course. I have plenty more where that came from. Do ask if you need anything." Kanata rises. "…Will you two be alright alone?"

"For now. I won't be leaving his side, not in a new place. Last time he woke up alone, he…" Shu trails off, realizing he is over-sharing.

"I understand. When supper is ready, I will have someone fetch you." Kanata gives a gentle bow and leaves.

Shu brushes the back of his hand across Mika's forehead. He feels cold, which is strange considering the heat outside. The temple itself is noticeably cooler. Shu wonders how that is—perhaps ice magic. It isn't uncommon. Even

weaker wizards can manage such spells, but there are hardly any truly powerful ones left these days.

Mika stirs at last. Relief floods Shu's chest.

"Mika, you're awake."

"Ngah… what happened?" Mika murmurs, staring at the ceiling.

"You fainted. I'm not sure why. Are you feeling better?"

"I feel funny."

"You should eat something."

"No… not like that. Somethin' is wrong," Mika says quietly. "I'm missin' my… nn… I can't shift, Master."

"What? Why are you trying to shift right now? Don't overexert yourself."

"No! I mean… The moment I reached those steps, I couldn't! It felt like part of me stopped working… I got all dizzy, 'an…"

Shu frowns. "How strange…"

"…They worship gods here, don't they? Maybe it's got somethin' to do with that."

It dawns on him then. "Proteus," Shu confirms.

Mika's eyes sharpen at the name. "I remember that one. You told me 'bout him…"

"Many here still worship him. The shapeshifting sea god."

"You should ask… if this is 'sposed to happen."

"I will, now that I understand what's wrong. Still, that's all it is? I'm glad you're otherwise unharmed."

Mika looks at him carefully. "Even if I can't shift… you don't mind?"

"Of course I don't mind," Shu says. "Why would that bother me at all?"

—

"Proteus…" Kanata tilts his head slowly, eyes drifting upward. "Ahh… the Old Man of the Sea, yes, I know him."

Shu nods. "This was once his place of worship, wasn't it?"

"Once?" Chiaki speaks through a bite of salmon. "It still is."

Kanata smiles faintly. "It is still very much his place. The sea does not forget so easily." He folds his hands loosely in his lap. "But… Why are we speaking of him?"

"Mika… you understand what he is, correct?" Shu asks Kanata.

"A shifter," Kanata says softly. "Mm… the rumors reached even here. And you are always holding him so close, Shu… so it was easy to guess that it was him." His gaze shifts to Mika. "You are a crow, yes?"

Mika nods.

Kanata hums, long and thoughtful. "Proteus loves the sea..." His eyes half-lid, almost dreamy. "But perhaps… he does not love all shapes equally? You're not a creature of the sea."

Shu stiffens slightly.

Kanata tilts his head again. "It's only a thought. I have not seen this before. I'm not all-knowing, you know." He chuckles. "I will ask the elders. They like to remember old things."

Then, without warning, his attention drifts fully to Mika.

"Mika… do you like fish?"

—

"These clothes are ridiculously revealing."

"I think ya look handsome, Master," Mika says teasingly, slipping his fingers through the open sides of Shu's sleeves and groping his chest.

"Mika," Shu rolls his eyes. "Ah—stop—"

"Did I catch you two at a bad time?" Chiaki's voice cuts in.

Mika immediately withdraws and stands stiffly at Shu's side

"No. It's fine. He was just…" Shu shakes his head. "Messing around. Anyway, you said you would show us around?"

"Mhm! It's my duty!" Chiaki beams. "The clothes, I know you're not used to them, but once we're outside in the weather, you'll feel a hundred times better."

Shu nods.

They follow Chiaki out of the temple. As they approach the steps again, Mika clings to Shu's arm. He shivers slightly when they step onto the rocky path and gives a small shake of his head.

"Alright?" Shu asks quietly.

"Yeah… I guess it's fine."

They follow Chiaki down a side path that branches away from the main road. He's explaining something about a

fishing pier, but Shu isn't listening. He's distracted by the dense greenery, and by the way Mika is squeezing his arm so tightly it's beginning to hurt.

Then something catches Shu's eye. A blue butterfly drifts past them, circling lazily before landing atop Mika's head.

Shu stares, wide-eyed. He's never seen a creature so vividly colored.

"Oh! How lucky you are, Mika!" Chiaki claps his hands together. The butterfly flutters away at the sound. "My bad…"

"Ngah?" Mika blinks, looking upward just in time to see it disappear. "Oh… a butterfly…"

"You'll see plenty more around here," Chiaki says cheerfully. "Come on, we're almost there."

He quickens his pace, and Shu follows. With their lighter clothing, the heat feels less suffocating now, almost pleasant against his skin.

Eventually, they reach another pier. This one is far more decorative than the one they arrived on, clearly intended for private use.

"The architecture is impressive, isn't it?" Chiaki asks.

Shu nods, though he's unsure why they're being shown this. It's beautiful… but unnecessary.

"I'd avoid jumping off it," Chiaki adds with an awkward laugh. "I tried that once and… well. Let's just say it was a bad idea. Okay! This way. This part is important."

The path diverts again. This time, it leads to the edge of a dense forest.

"I'd recommend not stepping foot in there," Chiaki says, his tone turning slightly more serious. "At least not without a guide. Although… even with one, there isn't much to see."

"There's nothin' in there?" Mika asks.

"Nothing of note, really… Big bugs, scary creatures. You'd probably get lost and mever find your way back," Chiaki explains. Then he brightens again. "What a bummer! Alright, this way!"

After a thorough tour of the grounds, Shu is exhausted from all the walking. Chiaki showed them every little detail he could think of. Still, Shu is appreciative, it does help. The place feels a little less foreign now.

"Typically, we don't gather for lunch," Chiaki says. "I can send something to your rooms, if you're hungry."

"I want more fish…" Mika says slowly.

"Well, we have lots of those," Chiaki hums.

—

Back in the temple, Shu lowers himself onto the mat provided for sleeping. He already misses having a bed and it's only been one night. Still, it isn't terrible. It's easier to tidy up, at least.

Mika lies on his stomach, legs kicking lazily in the air as he happily shovels raw sashimi into his mouth.

"Enjoying yourself?" Shu asks, glancing over him.

Mika's clothes have slipped off one shoulder, his shorts riding dangerously high. Shu rarely feels tempted in such casual situations. Perhaps he should request that Kanata provide Mika with proper trousers, like his own…

"Nn, the fish 's good…" Mika licks his fingers. "C'mere, kitty…"

The tiny black kitten has been keeping a polite distance, surprisingly, given the scent of food. Mika offers him a small piece, and the kitten eagerly takes it, then nudges for another.

"Okay, that's enough… You'll get fat if I feed ya more," Mika says, gently nudging him away.

Shu watches fondly.

"Aren't ya hungry, Master?"

"Not particularly. I'd rather wait for dinner. They serve bread and soup then."

"So… ya don't like fish?"

Shu shakes his head. "I don't hate it, but…"

"Picky," Mika teases, sticking his tongue out. "Oh, but will ya eat it if I feed it to you?"

Shu is about to protest, but Mika is already on his knees, crawling toward him with a slice of tuna pinched between two fingers. Unluckily for Shu, he is far too easy to persuade.

"Open up~"

Shu opens his mouth. Mika carefully places the tuna on his tongue. Shu chews and swallows.

"Ah, yer so obedient."

Shu shivers and crosses his legs. "What are you talking about?" he huffs. "I don't want another," he adds firmly.

"Mm, okay, fine." Mika glances back at the kitten, who is staring at them. "I wanna touch you, but it feels weird doin' that with him in here."

Shu laughs softly. "…Seriously?"

"Whaaat? Don't ya agree?" Mika scowls. "He's like my baby…"

"What do you suggest we do with him, then?"

"I don't know…"

Shu slides a hand over Mika's bare shoulder. "He is only a cat, Mika."

"Only this time, then… Any other time, I'm kickin' him out."

"Noted," Shu leans forward and kisses Mika, then sits back with a frown. "Ugh, you taste like fish."

Mika licks his lips. "So do you. Ya just ate some."

"There's no foregoing that, then… I can bear with it." Shu curls his hand into the back of Mika's hair and pulls him close, kissing him deeply.

"Master," Mika murmurs, his hand sliding beneath Shu's clothes easily. It's convenient, Shu thinks, to be touched like this. Mika drags his hand up Shu's torso, his fingers still slightly oily from the fish. "Mm, I wanna taste ya—"

Shu hesitates, then reluctantly sits back. "Quickly, now. If someone comes—"

Quickly, indeed. Mika grabs his pants and pulls them down. Shu has no underwear, as he was instructed they weren't needed with this outfit, giving Mika direct access. He leans between Shu's legs, hands resting on either side of his hips, and licks a broad stripe up his cock. Shu moans softly, taken aback by the suddenness. Usually removing clothes is a longer process.

Mika takes him into his mouth. He sucks, and bobs his head, paying close attention to the slit like he knows Shu enjoys. Soon enough, Shu shuts his eyes and his spend fills Mika's mouth. The shifter sits back and swallows, letting out a pleased sound.

"Nothin' compares to that," Mika says, "not even the fish…"

—

Somehow, they settle in nicely. The heat becomes easier to bear, and Shu even manages to get Mika into a pair of pants rather than shorts to cease his mind.

Four days later, Shu receives a letter from Rei. He'd only announced their departure the day they left, taking his hiding upon himself.

He opens the seal slowly, hesitant. He wonders if he's going to be scolded. That would be ideal. He hopes it isn't any bad news.

Shu,

You're mature enough for me not to hide the bad news from you now, aren't you?

The truth is, you were wise to leave when you did. The guard showed up two days later, and they seemed very angry. But most weak men in positions of authority are, so I don't know if their anger was directed toward us for the King, or out of their own will.

Regardless, your grandsire has been taken to the capital.

Shu stops reading, taking a deep breath to collect himself.

They claim this is not a hostage situation, but I don't see how it could be anything else.

You need not fret. I will oversee that he is not harmed. Stay where you are, please. You will be safer there than anywhere else.

I will send more letters. Kanata is a trusted friend of both of us, isn't he? He's a good boy. He will take good care of you. Until then…

Shu sets the letter down. He closes it and stares at the red seal on the paper, rubbing his thumb over the wax.

"Master, what's that?"

"…Rei…" Shu hesitates. Should he speak the truth and worry Mika? Last time he lied, he felt horrible. "The guard took my grandsire."

"Oh," Mika lets out a soft breath.

"I'm glad we left when we did."

"Is he okay?"

"From what Rei says, he's fine. And he will remain that way…" Shu shakes his head. Despite the reassurance in the letter, he still feels awful. "Mika… little crow, come here."

Mika crawls into Shu's lap, where he sits on a mat in front of the desk. He tucks himself against Shu, offering all the skinship he can.

—

One day, while Shu is wandering the garden, he stumbles upon Mika… and a familiar face. It startles him nearly to death. He's been here almost a month and has yet to see anyone familiar, stuck with the same faces day in and day out.

The blonde stands a few feet away from Mika, who looks seriously upset. Shu steps between them immediately.

"Kaoru—?"

"Ya know this blonde guy?" Mika grumbles. "…Master, he thought I was a girl."

"I understand my Mika is quite dashing, but he hardly looks effeminate…" Shu sighs, rolling his eyes. "Did Rei send you?"

"He knows Rei?" Mika asks.

"This is one of Rei's lovers," Shu explains. "Oh, my bad. One of his knights. I'm not supposed to say it."

"You're as cruel as ever, Shu…" Kaoru huffs, rubbing the back of his neck. "No, Rei didn't send me. I'm one of Kanata's friends. I thought everyone knew this?"

"I was unaware."

"I'm sorry, um… What's your name?" Kaoru asks Mika.

"Mika."

"I apologize, Mika, for my advances… obviously they were in the wrong place, haha—"

"But if yer with Rei, what's it matter whether I'm a girl or not? Just don't sneak up on people and whisper weird things in their ear!"

Shu scowls at Kaoru. "…What on earth did you say to him?"

Kaoru shrugs. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Seriously. I was on my way to the temple. You asked if Rei sent me? I actually haven't seen him for a bit…" His words trail off a little sadly.

"How long is 'a bit'?"

"Since he left the castle. Last I heard from him, he was at your family's keep. It's been silent since. I had no idea you were here."

That's good, Shu thinks. Word must not have spread of his presence here. "Do not breathe a word to anyone of our existence on this island, at least no one who doesn't already live here."

"Of course. I won't say a peep."

"Do you mind if we walk back with you? It's hot out, I need some shade."

"Oh, sure. Honestly, I was getting a bit lost. The gardens are crazy. Lead the way?"

—

As they approach the temple, Kanata appears at the entryway, and his eyes widen at the sight of Kaoru. He moves quickly down the steps. Shu has never seen him move so fast since they arrived. Kanata reaches out and wraps his arms around Kaoru, embracing him tightly.

"So they're like that?" Mika mutters.

"I don't know… Kanata is peculiar."

"What does he see in him?" Mika says.

"That's rude," Shu remarks. "Kaoru is a good knight, and a good man. At least from all the stories I've heard."

"You'd disagree if ya heard what he said to me… It's rude to say that to a lady…"

"What was it?"

"It's best if I don't repeat it." Mika tugs on Shu's sleeve. "Nn, can we go inside? I'm gettin' all sweaty."

Later that evening, everyone gathers for dinner outside.

"It's livelier tonight," Shu comments, studying the crowd.

"I wonder why… 's it somethin' special?"

"I'm sure Chiaki would have told us…" Shu says, glancing around warily. Nothing seems out of the ordinary aside from the fact they're outside, and lanterns hang from the trees, glowing brightly… ones he hadn't noticed before. In the night air, he can hear the waves distantly.

"Oh, you two! Kanata's been in the best mood since Kaoru returned, so we're having supper outside. Isn't it nice? The weather's changing, too. It's perfect!" Chiaki says, skipping past them.

"Feels too good to be true," Mika huffs.

"What?"

"Like… it's always nice and perfect here…"

"Some people are simply lucky," Shu shrugs. He doesn't want to dwell on it. He has enough to worry about as it is.

"Look, Master. What are they doing?"

"Making lanterns, it appears," Shu says, as Mika points out two girls in staff uniforms. They're sitting on a blanket on the ground with materials spread out in front of them.

"I want to make one…"

Shu nudges him encouragingly. "Then go. I won't stop you."

Mika blinks up at him. “What if I’m not allowed?”

“They’ll turn you away kindly if that’s the case.”

Shu watches Mika head over hesitantly. His eyes follow him as he asks to join, and the girls unsurprisingly allow it. Relieved, Shu approaches the older group seated in the grass on a larger blanket. It’s thick and twined, clearly meant for sitting outdoors.

“Shu… there you are,” Kanata says, patting the space beside him. Kaoru sits awfully close to him, lounging back on his hands. “Hm, where is the little one?”

“Making lanterns.”

“Ah, I used to love doing that as a kid!” Chiaki recalls.

“Well, he is not much younger than me, actually…” Shu mutters as he takes the offered seat, crossing his legs.

“Shu… you don’t really like fish, do you…?”

“I’ll eat it, don’t worry. I appreciate it.”

“Shu is too kind… I can tell you don’t like it. You’re bad at hiding your expressions. Don’t worry… I requested extra bread and soup for you.”

“You didn’t have to do that—”

“Kanata’s pretty generous, huh?” Kaoru hums from his other side. For some reason, he looks oddly content, his eyes lidded. “There’s alcohol too,” he suddenly adds.

Oh. That makes sense.

“It’s very strong,” Kanata says, reaching forward to grab a glass. He fills it and hands it over.

Shu takes a sip and immediately grimaces. He favors wine over… whatever this is. “Well, I suppose it’s not supposed to taste the best…”

Chiaki laughs. “Haha, nope!”

—

“Master,” Mika mumbles, pressed against his side. “Yer stumblin’. You’ve never been like that after drinkin’ wine…”

“What I had was…” Shu hiccups, “…entirely different. Stronger. Kanata said so…”

Mika helps him inside to their room, and Shu immediately sinks down to the floor. His head is spinning, but he reaches out and grabs Mika’s legs where he still stands beside him, wrapping his arms around him and pulling him closer.

“You’re so warm,” Shu mumbles.

“I think that’s just yer own body,” Mika says. “Um… maybe we should go to bed…”

“No. I don’t want to.” Shu clings to him tighter, looking up at Mika with a dazed, shy blink.

“Uhm, Master—”

Shu fumbles with Mika’s waistband, tugging at him.

“Ahh, I’m not even—” Mika mumbles. “Shu… Master—s-stop—”

Mika doesn’t truly resist, but there’s hesitation in his voice. Shu, spurred on by the alcohol, he leans forward and clumsily takes Mika’s quickly hardening length. Mika lets out a soft sound above him. Shu’s hand wanders between Mika’s legs, his fingers pressing against his entrance.

“Nn—we don’t have anything,” Mika whines, squeezing his legs together as he shifts back. “Let’s just go to bed. Yer bein’ weird. Can ya even think straight?”

“I can think just—fine—” Shu argues, blinking slowly. “Maybe not my best. But this is a normal amount of thinking I’m doing,” he insists. “Do you really want to go to bed?”

“I don’t wanna do it if yer drunk…” Mika says quietly. He sounds off, unsettled in a way that cuts through Shu’s haze. The expression on Mika’s face sobers him.

“I’m sorry,” Shu breathes. “Yes. We can go to bed. Ah… your clothes…” He pulls Mika’s pants back up properly.

“Nn, well now it’s…” Mika mumbles. “Can’t just ignore it…”

Shu stands, wobbling slightly, and leads him toward their beds on the other side of the room.

“Do you want me to help?” Shu asks more carefully this time.

“Only if that’s… it,” Mika says softly. “Sorry. I know it sounds selfish, but I’m…”

“I’ll want to ask you about this later,” Shu says gently, guiding him down. “If you want to tell me why it bothers you.”

Mika’s mouth opens, then closes. He settles down and crawls into Shu’s lap instead. Shu grabs a folded blanket and pulls it over them, managing to lie down with Mika clinging to him.

—

Shu wakes the next morning with a terrible headache and stomachache combined. Mika is still clinging to him like an octopus with eight sticky limbs. He carefully pries him off and glances around the dimly lit room. There's a tray by the door with two glasses of water, a small bowl of fruit, and a vial.

"Ah…" He suspects the alcohol is to blame. He slowly walks across the room, picks up the vial, and pours the sour liquid down his throat before gulping from one of the glasses.

"Master," Mika grumbles from the bed. "Why'd ya leave me…?"

"Leave you?" Shu says. "I'm right here." He brings the tray back with him and sets it down nearby before crawling beneath the blankets again. Mika immediately scrambles to cling to him.

"My mind is clearer," Shu states quietly. He hadn't been so drunk that he forgot what happened. He stares at the wall. "…I'm sorry. You don't have to forgive me. What I did was improper."

"Um, 's fine… don't worry 'bout it too much… It just reminded me of bein' in town too much," Mika murmurs against his chest. "Lotsa drunk old men… ya know how it goes."

Shu strokes his back gently. Truthfully, he doesn't know. His family had only permitted him to enter the capital during major events, and even those were rare.

"Do you mean…?"

"I told ya before, didn't I? That I worked in a brothel when I turned sixteen… Well, thankfully that was the same year ya found me, so it wasn't for very long."

Shu feels even more guilty now. He doesn't think he'll ever be tempted to touch alcohol again.

—

After they've been at Kanata's island for exactly a month, Shu receives another letter from Rei. Kaoru delivers it, handing it over with a suspicious look, and perhaps a flicker of jealousy in his eyes.

Shu takes it and retreats to the privacy of his room. Or mostly privacy, as Mika peers over his shoulder.

He's decided it's best not to hide things from him anymore, if they're going to trust each other fully. The good and the bad alike. Shu's fingers tremble slightly as he studies the seal before opening it.

The red wax of the Sakuma house, stamped with the bat sigil, isn't quite as red as usual.

It gives him pause. He stares at it longer than necessary, unease creeping up his spine, until he convinces himself it's such a small thing it must mean nothing. He cuts it open.

Shu,

I request your presence in the motherland immediately.

Take one of Kanata's ships back. I will have someone stationed at the port to collect you. I will explain upon your return. Please listen, this is necessary.

Shu stares at the paper. The ink is smudged faintly in one corner. Was it written in haste?

"That's no good," Mika mutters over his shoulder.

Shu startles slightly, having forgotten he was there.

"I guess we have to leave."

Mika sulks, but unlike last time, he doesn't flare into anger.

"It's weird he didn't say what was goin' on. Don't ya think he would've? Rei tries to be gentle, but he doesn't hide things from you…"

"…Regardless, he has requested I return."

"'We' return," Mika corrects immediately.

"Nowhere does it state that you must accompany me. You would be safer here. I trust Kanata and his friends."

"Yer not goin' without me," Mika says, planting his feet on the floor. He stares down at Shu defiantly. "Don't even think about it, Master."

Shu closes his eyes. "Please don't make this difficult. What do you expect me to do? What if the moment we step foot on the mainland, word spreads and they come to seize you?" His voice tightens despite himself. "Stay here. I will return, or I will write until I can."

"Nn… no," Mika shakes his head. "Ya can't just leave me."

"You will stay if I tell you to," Shu says sharply, then exhales. "No… I am requesting that you stay. It would ease my mind. I would not be so… distracted by fear."

Immediately, tears well in Mika's eyes and spill down his face.

"I am not leaving you permanently, Mika…"

"But if something happens—"

"No one will hurt me," Shu insists. "Rei will be there… and harming me would cause more trouble than it is worth. I assure you of that. Also, Rei would not summon me without reason."

"M–Master…" Mika wails, collapsing forward and burying his face in Shu's chest.

—

The day he leaves feels colder than the rest. The wind bites at his skin.

Shu returns to his usual attire, fastening his cloak before stepping aboard the finest ship Kanata has to offer. He had intended to travel with the regular sailors, but the young lord refused him… and he is notoriously difficult to deny.

Shu grows seasick again. This time he truly retches over the side of the boat. Perhaps it is anxiety making it worse, he can't tell. He coughs and leans heavily against the railing nearly the entire journey, clutching the folded letter in his pocket as if it might anchor him.

When they arrive, Shu feels faint.

He steps onto the pier and looks around. Common folk crowd the docks. Fishermen, merchants, laborers… but he sees no sign of Rei. No one bearing the Sakuma crest. No familiar face.

A hollow feeling settles in his chest.

Then suddenly, hands seize his arms from behind and wrench them back painfully.

His luggage hits the dock.

"What—"

"You are to be detained by order of the crown," a voice states coldly behind him as his wrists are bound. "You stand accused of conspiracy and disloyal conduct toward His Majesty."

Shu's heart drops.

Immediately, he thinks of the red colored seal. It had been wrong, hadn't it?

As panic floods his thoughts, more men in white surround him, their grip firm and impersonal. He is hauled forward without ceremony. Then shouting erupts behind him, loud and violent.

Even the guards restraining him pause and turn. A crow cuts across the sky.

"No… Mika," Shu breathes.

Did he follow him? How had he slipped aboard? Surely Kanata wouldn't have allowed it—

A guard shouts for a fisherman to cast a net. In his distress, Mika's wing catches against the weighted mesh. It drops over him heavily. He struggles, but the net drags him down. Within moments, he is pinned beneath it as hands rush to restrain him.

Shu's eyes burn, and he turns away. This was inevitable, wasn't it?

He recalls his grandsire's words: You are not omnipotent.

He was right.

Notes:

I'm a history major and while studying something for school I stumbled upon Proteus being a sea god and also god of shapeshifting which stuck with me. I was hesitant involving real Greek mythology, it's definitely not going to be anything close to the real thing…just… go with ittttttt

Ty for reading! I love seeing everyone's comments, I'll try to take the time to reply if I can :3
Also, their ages in this AU don't follow canon so if this helps:
Shu 19
Mika 18
Rei 29
Ritsu 16
Kanata 19
Chiaki 20
Kaoru 25

Chapter 4 (http://archiveofourown.org/works/80032311/chapters/210933891)

Notes:

Bottom (sorta) Shu in this chapter at last

(See the end of the chapter for more notes (#chapter_4_endnotes).)

Shu is surprised when he's not thrown into a dungeon, but escorted into an ornate chamber. His wrists are untied.

A tray of food sits near the foot of a large canopy bed. The doors, however, are locked. He tests them at once. The balcony overlooks a drop of at least five stories. There's no escape.

Shu paces for what feels like hours, back and forth, until his legs ache. Finally he sits, rubbing his thighs, his thoughts spiraling.

What can he do? What is there left to fix?

Finally, the doors open.

A tall man with blue hair, clad in white knight's armor, enters with Mika held by the arm. His grip is firm but not cruel. He nudges him forward.

"Mika!"

Shu nearly stumbles over his own legs. They collide, clutching each other desperately. Mika begins to cry into his shoulder, not from pain, but from relief.

"Amazing… the bond you two share is remarkable," the knight observes calmly from the doorway.

Shu glares at him over Mika's head and pulls him closer still, as though he could fuse them into one… gold and silver melted together.

"I'm not here to separate you again," the knight says. "He remains with you for now. His Majesty will see you shortly."

"Are you hurt?" Shu asks immediately, running his hands down Mika's arms, examining him carefully for any injuries.

He's dressed in fine clothing, surprisingly so. A silk blouse and trousers that fit him properly. Shu is grateful they had the decency to dress him once he shifted back. Shu takes Mika's hand and brings it to his lips, pressing a soft kiss against his knuckles, and holding it to his mouth for a long moment.

"They didn't hurt me…" Mika says quietly. "At least, not on purpose. Doesn't make it any better. They put me in a real bird cage until I turned back, Master. It was humiliatin'."

"They know nothing of you," Shu sighs. "Why did you follow me? I find it difficult to be angry with you, I'm only relieved you're safe… but now you understand why I was worried."

"I'm sorry… I snuck on…" Mika trails off. "Nn… I left the kitten on the boat." He frowns faintly.

"We'll retrieve him," Shu assures. "The captain was one of Kanata's best. I'm certain they'll return him safely to the island." He exhales, long and unsteady, and pulls Mika close again. "God… I'm glad you're alright."

"M–me too. I mean… I'm glad yer okay…" Mika melts against him. Then, quieter, "Master… Do ya remember what happened when I first went into the temple?"

"When you lost consciousness?" Shu murmurs into his shoulder. He has no intention of letting go any time soon. "Hm… I wonder if Kanata ever discovered anything. He said he would ask, but…"

"He seems like a bit of an airhead."

"The opposite, actually," Shu replies softly. "He is far more perceptive than he allows others to believe." Shu pauses, "Anyway. What about it?"

"When I… when I got here. To the King's castle," Mika clarifies. "It felt the same. I can't shift."

Shu stills. "So it wasn't the sea god?" He pulls back at last, studying Mika's face carefully… memorizing his eyes, committing them to memory as though he might lose it. "That can only mean one thing."

"Mmm? What's that?"

"It's not common knowledge, but the King keeps wizards in his service." Shu's voice lowers slightly. "It is possible the grounds are sealed. Which could also be the case at the temple… That would be the most logical explanation."

"…Sealed?"

"Yes." Shu's fingers tighten unconsciously around Mika's sleeve. "You were never educated on wizardry, were you? It is ancient, largely irrelevant to most of our lives. Though it surfaces from time to time…"

Mika sighs softly. "That's a relief…"

"Is it?" Shu asks.

"Well… I was seriously worried fer a minute that Proteus didn't like me 'cause I'm a crow."

Shu laughs fondly and shakes his head. "I don't yet know what they intend to do with us," he says. "Depending on their plans, I will make inquiries where I can."

—

Shu and Mika sit uneasily in their chambers for hours. They have no idea when, or if, His Majesty intends to arrive.

Mika idly picks at the tray of fruit provided for them, though he doesn't eat a single piece. Shu doesn't either. They are both too anxious to stomach anything. For a fleeting moment, Shu even wonders if it has been laced with

poison. He lifts a grape between his fingers, rubbing it suspiciously, before setting it back down.

The door opens again. Shu straightens at once, alarmed. But it's not the King.

"Rei?"

"I am going to kill that bastard," Rei mutters darkly as the door swings shut behind him. "Are you two unharmed? I would hope His Majesty doesn't have it in him to injure you without reason, but he can be… unpredictable."

"We're fine," Shu says, rising to his feet.

"Why did you come back?" Rei asks sharply.

"Your letter…" Shu trails off. "It wasn't from you, was it?"

"What letter?" Rei's eyes narrow. Then realization dawns on him. "Oh, he is going to regret this." His voice drops. "You do know it wasn't from me, yes? I would never have you seized like that. Things were going so well… too well, perhaps. I thought I had it handled. And to think he forged my name, lured you here—"

"I suspected something was amiss," Shu interrupts quietly. "The seal was the wrong color. I knew the moment they grabbed me that it wasn't you." His gaze sharpens. "…Did he permit you to enter?"

"He believes I'm not foolish enough to attempt anything dramatic," Rei says dryly. "Or perhaps he simply believes I can be civil. I am trying to resolve this through proper discussion." He sighs, then turns to Mika. "Little bird… when you arrived here, did anything feel unusual?"

"Nn… yes! I—"

"As I suspected." Rei's expression hardens. "He's had Natsume seal the grounds."

"Natsume? As in—?"

"The prodigy wizard." Rei's lips press into a thin line. "Absurdly powerful. Far more than someone his age ought to be…"

"Since when?"

"I don't know exactly when they brought the boy here. He may have even offered himself up—a trade, his comfort for a handful of spells." His gaze shifts briefly, something distant flickering there. "I knew him before this. He's had a difficult life. I wouldn't be surprised."

"Is my grandsire alright?" Shu asks, followed by, "…Is the King going to see us?"

"They've released him now that they've managed to capture you both. He's unharmed, from what I know. As for the King…" Rei runs a hand through his hair. "I don't know." He steps closer to Shu. "Shu, I'm sorry. Please understand that I am doing what I can. I don't believe he intends to harm Mika. If anything… he would keep him confined, if that eases your mind." His voice lowers. "But I won't allow that either."

Rei grips Shu by the shoulders, firm but not rough.

"You do trust me, don't you?"

—

When the King arrives, dusk has already fallen, leaving the room dim and heavy with shadow. The door opens slowly.

He steps inside in pristine white garments, the fabric nearly luminous in the fading light. The guard from earlier follows at his side.

Shu has seen him before, at familial gatherings. Eichi always carried the aura of something angelic. But the wary darkness in his expression now, and the circumstances of their meeting make him seem anything but.

"Where's the shifter?" Eichi asks, his gaze settling on Shu.

Shu extends a hand toward the edge of the bed, telling Mika to say where he has taken refuge behind it.

"You intend to speak with him?"

"I can hear the tremor in your voice," Eichi replies. "I'm not going to hurt him, if that's what you're really asking." Eichi gestures to the guard. "Behind the bed," he says softly.

The guard circles around. Shu stiffens as he does, his muscles locking despite himself. He watches carefully as the guard merely extends a hand toward Mika, to his quiet relief, instead of dragging him out like an animal.

"It's… alright," Shu says softly. It's the only thing he can offer.

Mika hesitates, then takes the guard's hand. His eyes squeeze shut as he's led toward the door.

"M–Master… Shu…" he murmurs.

"I'll return him soon," Eichi says.

"What— No. Take me with you." Shu steps forward. "He cannot speak for himself."

"He cannot?" Eichi laughs softly.

"He doesn't understand political policy, or court etiquette. He may say something that offends you. So please." Shu forces civility into his tone, though anger bleeds beneath it.

Eichi glances at Mika briefly, then he turns away. The door closes behind them.

—

The castle is larger than anywhere Mika has ever been.

By the time he's led down the corridor, his stomach has turned over on itself. He feels like he might puke. The guard releases his hand, only to rest one at the back of his neck instead. It's firmer now that Shu is no longer watching.

They stop at a dining hall. It's smaller than he expected.

"Sit," Eichi says.

Mika hesitates.

"What your master said… can you speak for yourself, or was it true? Just do as you're told and you won't anger me, I assure you."

Shakily, Mika lowers himself into the chair.

"I believe you know why you're here," Eichi continues. "My great-aunt… she was your mother. And don't lie. We've found the records, and the man who called himself your father—he confessed, before we had him removed."

Mika swallows hard. He grips the arms of the chair until his palms burn.

"I have a question for you," Eichi says, sliding into the chair opposite him. Mika's body wants to flee, but he can only sit.

"Y-yes?" he mutters.

"You won't challenge my lineage, will you?"

"Why would I—"

"You're a shifter. And we share blood. That makes you stronger than me, automatically… and, by some accounts, more acceptable to the crown. At least according to the old stories. Though I don't know if it still works that way… succession, I mean, especially since you're… well, a bastard child."

"That's… that's the last thing I want. Why would I want to be King? S- someone like me, even… no matter what anyone says, I couldn't… I could never do that, or be that—"

"In the past, shifters led the city," Eichi continues, almost conversationally, as though Mika isn't trying to defend himself. "Not to mention, you're a half-breed. Do you know how special that makes you?"

"N- no?"

"Of course you don't," Eichi says with a loud sigh, as if Mika's naivety genuinely bothers him. "Shu doesn't either. He thinks himself so wise and clever… but he's nothing but a sheltered boy, as I was at his age." He taps the table once, emphasizing the statement.

A maid enters then, carrying plates of food. She sets them before Eichi first, Mika second, and lays down silverware. Mika doesn't touch it. Eichi begins to eat casually, unconcerned.

"Please, just let us go," Mika pleads, his voice trembling. "I won't ever come back—I won't—"

"How can you promise something like that?"

"Put a spell on me!" Mika blurts, desperation rising. "Your wizard can do it, seal me, so I can't ever shift again—and… I'll go! Forever! I don't want to be like this anyway—it's ruined everything! I hate it!"

Mika is crying before he even realizes it. Fat tears spill down his face, burning his eyes. He's cried so much today. He wipes at his cheeks, but it doesn't stop. He just keeps sobbing.

"Get the boy a cloth, would you?" Eichi asks the maid.

She retrieves one and places it in front of Mika. He refuses to touch it.

"I'm trying to have a proper conversation with you, Mika," Eichi's voice carries. "I understand… you're upset."

The door swings open.

"Ah, my guest has arrived."

Rei steps into the small dining room. Mika blinks up at him.

"Mika, little bird," Rei says softly, like a memory brushing against him. Mika blinks the tears away, relief trickling in at the familiar voice and face. He doesn't sit. Rei moves behind Mika's chair and gently pats his head. "What did you say to him? Eichi, I know you're cruel, but I hardly believed you heartless—"

"I think he's just a crybaby," Eichi says dismissively.

Mika sniffles.

"I overheard your conversation," Rei says quietly.

"Always listening," Eichi shakes his head. "Rei… tell me, what do you think of the boy's suggestion?"

"To carve power out of a body is not mercy…" Rei argues.

"And what do you suggest I do then? Simply let him take flight? You're insane, Rei. You think of nothing but good in everyone… as much as I want it to be that way, if I must rule, then it must be so."

"Make it temporary. Natsume can do that, can't he? Or perhaps he cannot take flight in the kingdom? He's done it for buildings; surely he can do it here as well."

"That will take a lot of power…" Eichi grumbles.

"So?"

"Your idea isn't unwise, but there is no guarantee."

“There is no guarantee to anything.”

—

“Why are we going down here? Aren’t the dungeons this way?” Shu pants nervously. “Where’s Mika?”

“Your worry is making me worry,” Rei says lightly, squeezing Shu’s hand as they descend the spiral steps. “We’re not going to the dungeons. Natsume is down here. It may look that way, but…”

“I see. You didn’t answer me. Where is Mika?” Shu presses again, more sternly.

Rei doesn’t reply.

“Rei, I’m not exaggerating when I say I will have your head if you don’t answer me right now—”

“You are exaggerating,” Rei scoffs. They step off the stairs into a dim stone corridor, torches flickering along the walls. “You think I wouldn’t have turned this place upside down if he were hurt? He’s fine.”

“Then… where are we going?”

“Mika had a suggestion,” Rei says. “I believe I’ve convinced His Majesty to entertain it.”

“A suggestion…”

“I don’t know if you’ll like it.”

“If it keeps him safe, I don’t see why I wouldn’t—” Shu cuts himself off. He looks around wearily. “I’m surprised the guards let you take me.”

“Like I said,” Rei replies smoothly, “they think I’m too smart to attempt anything dramatic. Besides, I hold authority over them.” Only then does he release Shu’s hand, as if realizing he’d been holding it all this time.

Shu looks down at his palm. It’s damp with sweat. They’re both anxious, but they’re just carrying it differently.

They enter a hidden chamber carved beneath the castle, though it bears no resemblance to a dungeon. The air hums faintly. At the center stands an enormous table, its surface covered by a delicately crafted map of the kingdom. It is so detailed that Shu wonders if it’s an illusion rather than the ornate marble it appears to be.

He reaches out, fingertips hovering over a tiny carved tower—

“What do you think you’re doing? I thought someone like you would know better than to touch things that aren’t theirs.”

The voice echoes across the room.

Shu jerks his hand back and folds both behind him. “I apologize.”

“Your crow will be here any minute,” Natsume says, stepping into view from the far side of the chamber.

He wears a blood-red cloak; his hair is the same striking shade. Shu has never met him before, but he’s heard enough stories. Even the air seems charged around him.

“You’ve been told of the suggestion,” Rei says. “What do you make of it?”

“It will take more than a few days,” Natsume replies. “And more than a little energy. It would be easier to seal the shifter itself.”

“What are you talking about?” Shu demands. He feels like he’s several steps behind.

“Mika suggested sealing the kingdom.”

Shu shivers. “The kingdom? Entirely?”

“Mm. A drastic proposal,” Natsume hums. “I’ve sealed the castle, and the temple… Which I assume you’ve already discovered, Shu.” He says Shu’s name with strange familiarity.

Shu frowns.

“But on that scale?” Natsume continues. “It would require more power than you can conceive, and I cannot predict the effect on a shifter. If I pour that much magic into the land… death would not be impossible.”

The room goes still.

“He could die,” Natsume says plainly. “If he remained within the kingdom. Or even if he approached the epicenter.”

“And where is that?” Shu asks, though he already knows.

“Here,” Natsume answers. “Unless His Majesty decrees otherwise.”

“D-die?” Shu breathes. He turns sharply to Rei. “Why wouldn’t you shut this down immediately? This is preposterous!”

“Think about it, Shu,” Rei says quietly. His voice is calm. “How long have you been confined to that castle of yours? You’ve considered escape before. Anyone in your position would. Imagine it — I could ensure you and Mika are provided for. You could leave. Explore.”

“That’s— that’s…”

The thought fractures something inside him. It had always been a distant fantasy, a childish one. Could he even survive beyond the walls? He had been spoon-fed privilege all his life, even while feeling imprisoned by it. Freedom had always seemed abstract. A beautiful concept, but impossible.

“You are more capable than you think,” Rei says. “The little bird chose you for a reason.”

“He chose me because I didn’t fear him,” Shu snaps. “Because I didn’t treat him like a monster. I was curious. That’s all.”

“You misunderstand,” Natsume cuts in. “Shifters do not choose on kindness alone. They are drawn to what resides within.”

“Within?”

“I would be curious to examine your family records,” Natsume says. “Have you?”

Shu stiffens. “There’s nothing to examine.”

“There are casters in your lineage. Not wizards of my caliber, perhaps — but practitioners nonetheless. It would explain the attraction.”

“This is ridiculous. No one in my family has ever touched magic.”

“Don’t you feel it?” Natsume asks.

Shu swallows. He had felt it the moment he stepped inside, that subtle vibration beneath his skin.

“An ordinary human would feel nothing,” Natsume continues softly. “Only cold, damp stone and darkness. You are not entirely ordinary.”

Their discussion falls silent when Eichi enters through the same door Rei and Shu had used. He is accompanied by the blue-haired knight, and Mika walks at his side.

Shu’s fingers twitch with the urge to cross the room and seize him, to check him for injuries, to hold him properly… But any sudden movement now might be seen as defiance. So he remains where he is, hands trembling at his sides.

The knight releases his grip on Mika’s shoulders. Rei gestures him forward.

Instead of the desperate reunion from earlier, Mika simply walks to Shu and tucks himself beneath his arm, fitting there like he belongs.

“I see you’ve brought the crow’s Master, Rei,” Eichi says.

“His presence is necessary if we’re to have a proper discussion,” Rei replies, faint emphasis on the last word.

“Mm. I grant you authority and you stretch it thin,” Eichi sighs. “Still, no harm appears to have been done.” His gaze shifts. “Wataru. Latch the door.”

The knight obeys.

“I would hate for anyone to grow high-strung and attempt something regrettable,” Eichi adds, his eyes settling on Shu. “Natsume,” Eichi continues, “what do you make of the proposal?”

“I… believe it’s possible,” Natsume says. He fidgets with the edge of his red cloak, noticeably less composed now that the king stands in the room. He retreats toward his desk, where tomes lie open and glass vials line the shelves.

Shu watches him, one hand resting at Mika’s waist. Mika is warm beneath his palm. He squeezes him.

“Are you alright?” Shu whispers, leaning closer. He doesn’t bother pretending their quiet conversation is private.

“Mhm… ’m fine,” Mika murmurs. “Did Rei tell you what I asked for?”

“Yes,” Shu replies under his breath. “You ridiculous boy. How did you even conceive of such a thing?”

Mika’s fingers curl into the fabric at Shu’s chest. “I dunno,” he mutters. “You said before… once or twice… that you wanted to run away with me.”

Shu stills.

“Maybe we can finally do that,” Mika continues softly.

“Running away is not a habit I intend to cultivate.”

“We won’t,” Mika insists. “Just… once. Or twice. That’s allowed, right?” His voice drops quieter. “Long as I’m with ya… it’ll be fine.”

“Spare us the whispering,” Wataru says lightly from Eichi’s side. “It’s redundant.”

“I would prefer clarity,” Eichi continues, folding his hands. “As the shifter has already explained, he does not intend to beseech me. I’m inclined to believe him, as you hardly seem capable of it.” His smile sharpens. “Or is that too cruel? The council is divided. Some of the elders cling to the notion that blood supersedes ability. Foolish, in my opinion, but they’re persistent. Until I determine whether you are a threat, your capture will remain undisclosed.”

Shu bristles at the way he speaks about Mika, as if he were lesser. He shifts, tugging Mika half a step behind him.

“Hide him if you like,” Eichi hums. “I admit, I find it amusing.” He turns away. “Natsume, do come and explain what this would require.”

Natsume steps toward the great map laid across the table. “The borders extend farther than this creation suggests,” he says, sweeping a hand over carved marble markers. Shu’s gaze catches on two in particular. His family’s castle, and his grandsire’s keep. Places he realizes he aches to see again, if only once.

“To accomplish what you’re requesting,” Natsume continues, “I would require approximately a week.”

“And the cost?” Eichi asks mildly.

“If I expend that much magic, it will drain me considerably.” Natsume’s eyes flick up. “I expect—”

“You will have whatever you desire,” Eichi interrupts smoothly. “As I’ve told you before.”

“Mm. Yes. As I was saying…” A faint glow blooms at the center of the map; the capital. Light radiates outward in a slow pulse.

“Mika,” Natsume says, meeting his gaze, “if I enact this seal, you cannot return. Should you attempt to cross back into the city, you will experience severe pain. Beyond the capital,” he gestures outward, measuring the distance with his hands, “approximately this far, you will remain unable to shift, as you are now. But if you come any closer, the pain will intensify. Do you understand?”

“Y-yes.” Mika nods quickly. “I’ll go. So just do it—”

“Are you so desperate to flee, Mika?” Eichi interrupts. “Did you even ask your Master what he wants?”

“He doesn’t need to,” Shu answers, unyielding. “He already knows I will go with him. No matter what.”

“Touching,” Eichi sighs softly. “Very well. We’ll proceed. And who knows? If other shifters are inspired to reveal themselves in the future… that would hardly be an unfortunate development.”

—

“Does he have to come with us?”

“Eichi wants confirmation, from someone he trusts, that you’ve left the kingdom entirely,” Rei says, brushing dust from a chest before opening it. “…I’ve come to understand that I am not one of those ‘trusted’ individuals.”

Wataru lingers by the door, leaning casually against the frame. He appears uninterested, but his presence alone is enough to unsettle Shu. The man doesn’t need to speak to be threatening.

“A week,” Shu murmurs. “Can we travel that far in a week?”

“We should manage, provided nothing delays us.”

“I can’t believe you’re coming with us.”

“Mm. Only temporarily.” Rei begins sorting through folded garments. “I’d like to see the two of you settled somewhere safe first. I’ve grown rather fond of you.” He lifts a neatly folded outfit. “Do you think this will fit him? It belonged to my younger brother. They’re both quite small.”

“Why do you have your brother’s things?”

“We visited the castle often. These were left behind.” Rei shakes the garment out gently. “Little bird, come here.”

Mika rises from the bed, where he’d been picking at his nails. Shu notices the thin red crescents along his cuticles.

Rei holds the clothing against Mika’s frame, measuring by eye. “It may be a tight fit. Nothing Shu can’t alter once you have the time, hm? It’s well-made, but not ostentatious. No one will assume it came from here.”

“Thank ya…” Mika murmurs.

Shu rests a hand on Mika’s upper back, sliding it down slowly. Mika glances at him from the corner of his eye.

“And you, Shu…” Rei rummages again. “I doubt I have anything precisely your size. Though—” he pauses thoughtfully, “we may have time to stop by your grandsire’s keep. Do you have clothes there you could take?”

“Y-yes.” The stutter slips out before Shu can stop it.

He’s been holding himself together by refusing to think. Refusing to let the reality settle… That he is leaving.

Rei looks at him carefully. “You may go through this chest yourself. Take whatever you like. Otherwise it will remain here, untouched.”

“Thank you,” Shu says.

“Eichi will send supper,” Rei adds. “Please eat it. It won’t be poisoned. He isn’t entirely insane, merely condescending.” His gaze travels briefly toward Wataru, who is very clearly listening. “You’re safe. For tonight.”

Shu doesn’t feel safe.

“You should rest, if you can,” Rei says. “I’ll fetch you at dawn. Is that acceptable?”

“Yes,” is all Shu manages to say. Mika nods beside him.

“Good. You’re both very good boys.” Rei offers a gentle smile before stepping out.

Wataru stays a moment longer, giving them a look that clearly says don’t try anything, then shuts the door behind him.

“Master…” Mika turns toward him.

The tears come before Shu can stop them. They spill hot and sudden down his cheeks. He clamps a hand over his mouth, choking back the sound threatening to tear out of him.

Mika’s eyes widen. “What’s— what’s wrong?!”

“What do you mean what’s wrong?” Shu’s voice fractures. “Mika… I said I wanted to run away with you. I said I would do anything. But this… this isn’t that. We’re being driven out.” His breathing turns uneven. “I always listen, I always do as I’m told. I’ve done everything properly and it still isn’t enough.” Shu’s shoulders begin to shake.

“There’s nothing I can do, is there? I have to obey. If I don’t, then what? What happens if I don’t?”

“Ngah, yer spiralin’, Master,” Mika says quickly, stepping closer. “Shu, sit down…”

He takes Shu by the arms and gently guides him to the bed. Mika sits beside him and pulls him in without hesitation, wrapping both arms around him and holding him tight.

The tears taper off almost as quickly as they came. Shu hates crying. Even if swallowing it down makes it worse, he doesn't care. He grips Mika's forearm and tugs his arms closer around himself.

"I missed… being in bed with you," Shu murmurs. "Privately. It's only been a few days, but I…"

"Nn, me too." Mika nuzzles into his shoulder. "Master… Can I ask somethin'? What d'you think we'll do once we're outta the kingdom?"

Shu exhales softly. "…There are other towns and kingdoms. Other places to see." He pauses. "Hm. We could become farmers."

"F–Farmers?" Mika squeaks, lifting his head. "I can't picture ya doin' that…"

"Oh? And why not?"

"Many reasons. First off, ya panic if a speck of mud gets on yer clothes—"

Shu huffs faintly despite himself. "Perhaps. But it's never too late to learn… or to change." His voice grows quieter. "I think I could do it."

"A farm…" Mika hums, settling back against him. "We could do it. Little baby animals runnin' around… feedin' 'em every mornin'…"

"I can sew," Shu says suddenly, the thought catching hold. "I could make clothes. I could become a seamster."

Mika perks up immediately. "Ahh, I didn't even think of that. Folks'd line up just to wear somethin' you made."

At least they can speak like this, about something more gentle. The more Shu lets the ideas unfold, the more pleasant they sound… small towns and quiet mornings. It feels almost unreal. Like it's something out of a storybook he might have read as a child; the sort with tidy endings and happiness. Those aren't real… are they?

"Do ya think you can sleep?" Mika asks softly.

"Probably not," Shu admits.

Mika pulls back just enough to look at him, though his arms remain wrapped securely around Shu's waist. Shu looks at him for a moment, then leans forward and presses a kiss to his mouth.

Mika hums, kissing him back without hesitation. His hands slide up to cup Shu's face, drawing him closer. They shift, clumsily, until they fall back against the mattress. Mika ends up between Shu's legs, braced carefully over him. When they break apart, a thin strand of saliva stretches between them before it breaks when Mika swipes his tongue across his lips. For reasons he can't name, Shu feels safe enough to ask for something he rarely does.

"Mika," Shu says quietly, "I want you inside of me."

Mika's eyes widen in the moonlight.

"I don't think that's a good idea right now," he says gently. "Yer already shaken… What if yer just sayin' that because you're overwhelmed? Master, ya usually get nervous when I even try…"

"No," Shu insists, even though his voice wavers. "I can handle it. I want to."

Mika hesitates, then shakes his head. "Not right now." He lowers himself enough to rest his forehead against Shu's shoulder. "I'm not doin' anythin' like that until you're somewhere safe. This place ain't safe. You were cryin' a minute ago."

Shu scowls at him. "So you're refusing me?"

He grumbles. "I'm protectin' ya," Mika replies, sharper than usual. "Even from yourself, if I gotta."

"Then… do something," Shu murmurs after a moment. "Distract me. Just for a little while."

Mika sits up slowly. "If ya wanna be distracted," he says, "all ya gotta do is say so."

He moves, pressing slow, reassuring kisses along Shu's jaw, his temple, his cheek—

"Mm, I'll compromise… What if I just put my fingers in?" Mika suggests, mouthing at Shu's collarbone.

"That's f- fine," Shu stutters, already flushed from the thought of it.

He hates how fragile he feels, and hates even more that Mika can see it.

"Think they've got oil in here?" Mika asks.

"I believe… I saw some in Rei's chest."

"Oh? Were ya lookin' fer it?" Mika teases him. "That's convenient."

"…Surely it's meant for polishing swords…" Shu replies.

"Could polish my sword," Mika hums with a smirk.

"That's unseemly… you're absurd," Shu says, though a laugh slips out. "Besides, you said only your fingers…"

Mika hops off the bed and retrieves the small bottle anyway, holding it up triumphantly before crawling back over him. His playfulness fades as quickly as it came.

"It was just a joke," Mika says as he crawls back over Shu. "I missed ya so much," he says softly. "Even though it wasn't long. Stayin' behind like ya said… I think I would've died."

"You wouldn't have died," Shu says. His voice shakes when Mika starts to kiss down his throat again, sucking just enough to leave a promising mark. "Although… I might've," Shu adds.

"…Good thing we won't ever be apart then," Mika says. He slips a hand beneath Shu's cloak, pushing the fabric until he touches his blouse. "Are ya sure it's safe to do this here?"

“What’s the worst that could happen…?”

“Rei said they’re sendin’ supper…”

“Then let’s make it quick,” Shu says, fumbling with his cloak, “I don’t need to undress, do I? We’ll do this properly in the future,” Shu says, short of breath despite not having done much. “Please… I told you, I want—“

“Mm-mm, I’m gonna distract ya, Master… don’t worry.” Mika says.

Mika reaches down and undoes the laces of Shu’s trousers, pushing them down. He opens the glass container of oil, pouring it over two fingers. “I know what ya mean…” he says softly. “When yer inside me, it’s hard to think about anythin’ else… Is that what ya want?”

Shu nods stiffly, spreading his legs without looking away from him. Mika slips his hand between them. He briefly brushes his fingers along Shu’s cock, but moves past it to where he really wants it.

“I like the faces ya make,” Mika says, “‘s different than… when we do it the other way,” he presses his finger against Shu’s entrance and it slowly sinks in.

Shu is tense; There’s barely any give at first. But Mika persists patiently, and eventually works his finger all the way inside. “It’ll feel better in a second,” he says, before carefully curling it, dragging along Shu’s walls.

It does feel better. Mika has always managed to make it pleasant the few times he’s gotten this far. Shu bites his lip and tilts his hips downward, urging him to continue.

His heart is racing, half with arousal and half with anxiety. He glances past Mika toward the dark stone wall of the castle. For a brief second, when Mika first pushed inside, he had forgotten where they were.

That’s what he wants.

“Keep going, another—“

“Does it feel good?” Mika asks, but he listens regardless. Shu feels the stretch of the second finger, and his body's resistance.

Mika bends to kiss his neck and jaw, rubbing his face against Shu like a cat. A soft, pleased hum vibrates against Shu’s skin.

“I told you…” Shu mumbles, recalling the moment on the ship. “You purr like one… nn, Mika—“

“…Maybe I can put it inside ya… Ahh, no… it’ll be better later,” he mumbles, almost to himself.

Shu drags one leg up the bed, bending it at the knee and tilting his hips. Mika’s fingers somehow don’t feel long enough.

He grabs Mika over his clothes, frustrated by the barrier of fabric. Mika thrusts his fingers in and out. He presses himself down Shu’s outstretched thigh, grinding against him. Shu can feel it clearly and it makes him more aroused than he cares to admit.

“Master—“ Mika’s voice falters as he pushes his fingers deeper. Shu shuts his eyes and lets out a soft moan that echoes quietly in the cold room. Heat floods over him. “Do ya want to finish like this? Can ya?”

Mika’s motions grow more insistent, and his hips match the rhythm of his hand. Shu finally gives in and reaches down, wrapping a hand around himself. He’s wetter than usual, and it slicks his grip as he strokes himself. He bites his lip hard, and when Mika thrusts in roughly, he cums with a muffled shout.

“Ngah— ah, master, I wanna cum—“

Despite the lingering tremble in his limbs, Shu presses his leg harder against Mika. Mika pulls his fingers out, and Shu hates the sudden absence but decides to ignore it. He moves and pushes Mika onto his back. Mika stares up at him, eyes heavy-lidded and dazed.

Shu pushes his thigh against him more firmly, and Mika lets out a loud, unrestrained moan.

“Hush,” Shu whispers sharply.

He doesn’t know where he finds the energy. His body feels unsteady and weak, but the expression on Mika’s face makes it worth it. Mika finishes against him, in his trousers. Shu continues the motion just slightly, teasing—

“Nnn— ah—ah, stop, I can’t—”

“Sorry,” Shu breathes, finally pulling away.

“Ugh,” Mika groans, “I can’t move…”

“You should change your pants,” Shu comments, rolling off of him.

Mika huffs, as if he’s embarrassed. “Put yers back on first…”

—

Rei collects them in the morning. Wataru travels with them, so all four sit in silence inside a plain brown carriage, deliberately left unremarkable for the sake of secrecy. No one needs to know who they’re moving. At least, that’s what Eichi insisted.

Mika somehow managed to squeeze into Ritsu’s old clothes. They’re undeniably tight. Shu can’t complain.

They sit opposite Rei and Wataru. Mika slips an arm around Shu’s waist and holds him close as the carriage jolts along the uneven road. The ride stretches on, long and monotonous.

Rolling hills pass beyond the small window, washed in dull morning light. It feels endless, until, at last, his

grandsire's keep rises into view.

Shu leans forward slightly. "Oh, is that him?" he asks, peering out. "Did he know I was coming?"

"I sent word," Rei replies with a small nod.

Relief floods Shu's chest. Then, just as quickly, something heavier settles beneath it.

He won't see his grandsire again after this. Not if he truly leaves the kingdom, not unless he returns without Mika.

The rest of his family… he could bear their absence. But his grandsire—

"What's wrong, Master?" Mika murmurs, taking his hand.

Shu keeps his expression carefully composed. With Wataru present, though the white knight appears absorbed in the scenery beyond the opposite window, he refuses to let anything show.

"It's nothing," Shu says evenly. "We should collect what we need. And say goodbye."

The carriage rolls to a slow halt before the gates.

"Shu." His grandsire greets him with a warm embrace. Mika is pulled into it as well. "I'm glad you're both safe… Ah, Mika, there's a surprise waiting for you inside."

"I'm sorry I got you involved," Shu says quietly once they part.

"I was the one who became involved," the old man replies gently. "Rei came to me first, did he not?"

"I'm… I'm the one who kept Mika," Shu insists. "Of course, I wouldn't change what I did, but…"

"Nonsense." His grandsire waves it away. "Come. Let's gather your things. You're pressed for time, aren't you?"

They walk the familiar stone path up to the keep. When the doors swing open, a tiny black kitten comes barreling out, its belly round and overfed.

"Ah—he's here!" Mika squeals, dropping to his knees to scoop the kitten into his arms.

"How did you—?"

"A blonde boy stopped by," his grandsire explains. "Kaoru, I believe was his name. He said you'd left the poor thing on the island. Lord Kanata told him. I recognized the kitten, of course." He sighs faintly. "I believe they've overfed him. That was not my doing."

"Mmm, it's fine, it's fine," Mika coos, petting the kitten's head. The little creature looks equally thrilled, purring loudly in his arms.

"Now then," his grandsire says, turning back to Shu. "Let's get your belongings."

Shu pauses as they step inside. He lets his gaze wander over the familiar walls. The bookshelves lined with worn spines, the old portraits, the heirlooms resting exactly where they always have. He tries to memorize it all without looking like he is.

He is led to one of the guest bedrooms. Two large chests sit at the foot of the bed.

"I've had your clothing packed," his grandsire says.

"I don't remember leaving this much behind."

"Of course you don't. I added a few things." A smile touches his face. "Several of your favorite books. Perhaps… too many. Though I've always believed one can never own too many books. In any case, will you manage these yourself, or shall I have the guards carry them?"

"I don't want to take your things—"

His grandsire fixes him with a stern look.

Shu exhales softly and drops the argument. "I can try."

His body has felt weaker lately, exhausted from everything that's happened, but he bends and lifts one of the chests anyway. It's heavier than he expects, yet he steadies himself and manages.

Mika offers no help, too absorbed in murmuring to the kitten cradled against his chest. Shu doesn't comment.

Once both chests are loaded and secured onto the carriage, they say their goodbyes.

"Write to me," his grandsire says, drawing Shu into one last embrace. His hold remains just a second longer than usual. "You can at least do that much. I may not be here much longer, but I will make do with whatever time we're given."

Shu swallows. "I will."

His grandsire pulls back and turns to Mika.

"And Mika… take care of my grandchild, won't you?" His tone softens. "He is far more fragile than he allows others to see, though I suspect you already know that."

Mika adjusts the kitten in his arms and nods solemnly. "I'll do my very best."

The end

Notes:

The end…. This is my first time writing anything longer than 10k words and completing it and I'm pretty happy with how it turned out
I hope it wasn't too rushed □
Ty for reading
ALSO! I have a bonus chapter that I'm uploading right after this ~~~

Chapter 5 (http://archiveofourown.org/works/80032311/chapters/210934481): Epilogue

Notes:

Enjoy

(See the end of the chapter for more notes (#chapter_5_endnotes).)

Shu bends down to the cat's level.

He's quite large now… fat, even, more a farm cat than the scraggly kitten they'd once smuggled across the sea. He's meant to roam the property and to keep the mice from the grain, but the truth is he mostly lounges wherever the sun is warmest.

"Kitty," Shu says, patting his round little head, "where is your owner? I can't seem to find him anywhere.

The cat only blinks at him, slow and indifferent.

Shu sighs and straightens. "I suppose I'll check the barn."

He makes his way across the pasture, lifting the hems of his long trousers to spare them from the mud. A few of the milk cows turn their heavy heads and moo as he passes. For a fleeting second he considers mooing back, but thinks better of it.

As he nears the barn, he spots Mika inside. He's shirtless and feeding one of their two horses. Shu's pace quickens.

"I was looking for you," he calls, stepping into the shade of the barn.

"Ahh, Master—sorry," Mika replies easily. He doesn't turn around right away, still rubbing the horse's neck. "You were so immersed in that sewin' project, I didn't wanna bug ya."

"Bug me? You could hardly ever do that," Shu says, stepping closer. His eyes trail over Mika's back before he can stop them. Sweat glistens along his shoulders. "Why don't you have a shirt on? How improper."

"'Cause it's hot," Mika says, finally turning with a grin. "Wouldn't you rather have fewer clothes to wash? And 's not like anyone comes around here."

"One of the girls is coming to collect her dress this afternoon," Shu replies. "Imagine if she stumbled upon you in this state."

Mika's grin widens. "Well," he says, stepping forward, "I hope she stumbles upon this—!"

He lunges forward, wrapping his damp arms around Shu. Shu yelps as he's dragged forward, pressed against his warm, sweaty skin, and kissed hard.

"Mika!" he protests into his mouth, trying, and failing, to push him away. "You're absolutely revolting—"

"Yer the one that came lookin' for me," Mika murmurs against his lips, "this 's what ya get."

"Gross—get off of me. I regret it already!"

Mika kisses him again anyway, and Shu can't help but kiss back. He keeps his palms firmly planted against Mika's chest, careful to avoid too much contact with his sweat-slick skin.

"C'mon," Mika teases, grinning. "I bet ya like it. Admit it! I smell good."

"I'm not as perverse as you, to be swayed by scent alone," Shu huffs. "Seriously. You stink."

Mika recoils as if struck. His arms slide slowly from Shu's shoulders.

"Oh." He turns away, returning to the horse and patting her nose with exaggerated tenderness.

"Don't take it to heart," Shu adds quickly. "Once you bathe, I'll love you properly."

Mika pauses.

"…Ya don't love me when I'm dirty?"

"That is not what I meant—!"

But Mika only hums and continues fussing over the mare. She's a pretty thing, chestnut with a pale stripe down her nose. Rei bought her for them before he left. He'd stayed for months, helping them settle, covering expenses they didn't yet understand. He'd written that he plans to visit again soon.

For a fleeting, irrational second, Shu feels jealous of the horse. How ridiculous.

"Why'd ya come lookin' for me?" Mika asks after a moment, still facing away.

"Even out here, I prefer to keep an eye on you," Shu replies, smoothing his sleeves. "Or at the very least know where you are."

“Mm. I see.” Mika nods thoughtfully. “Well, ya better head back to the house before that lady gets here.”

Shu steps forward, only for his foot to sink slightly into damp earth beneath the water bucket. He grimaces at the sensation. “Why are you suddenly being so dismissive?”

Mika glances at him over his shoulder, raising a brow. “If ya don’t love me when I’m stinky, then…”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” Shu sighs, exasperated. “Fine. Come here. He opens his arms stiffly.

Mika doesn’t hesitate. He hums, satisfied, and sinks into the embrace at once, sweat and all. Shu winces for half a second… then relaxes.

“…You are still bathing after this,” he mutters into Mika’s shoulder.

“Mmhm,” Mika replies, smiling against his collarbone.

—

“Yuckkk,” Mika whines, immediately spitting whatever he just tasted from the ladle back into the bowl.

Shu freezes in horror. “Did you just—Mika—”

“I’m sorry! Ugh—” Mika wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. “It’ll cook off, right? Heat gets rid of the germs ‘n whatnot…” He peers miserably into the pot. “Um. It’s seriously bad. Look, I know you’ve never had to cook a day in yer life, but ya gotta read a book or somethin’. Ask one of the ladies who buys your dresses. I’m sure they can help.”

“Surely it cannot be that terrible—” Shu lifts the ladle with reluctant dignity and brings it to his lips. Mika exaggerated, but only slightly.

The taste is catastrophic. Shu forces himself to swallow, expression tightening as if he’s just endured a personal insult.

““I’d rather just eat meat ‘n potatoes,” Mika declares, leaning back against the counter, “and that fancy bread from town when we’ve got the money.”

“The croissants,” Shu corrects automatically. “Ah, yes… those are my favorite as well. Perhaps I should learn to make them.”

Mika perks up instantly. “I’d love ya forever ‘n ever if ya did that,” he hums, patting his stomach. “Ugh, imaginin’ it now’s makin’ me hungrier… Master…”

Shu glances toward the window, calculating. “We have enough saved for a small indulgence,” he says at last. “Shall we run into town quickly?”

Mika lights up. “Ah—yes!”

—

“Mm, do ya like when I do that? Master… ya have to tell me…”

“I d- don’t have too—“ Shu breaks into a moan as Mika pulls him down harder on his cock, holding him by his wrists. The pace is brutal, but one he’s grown accustomed to—somehow Mika has coaxed him into this again and again. When there is nothing pressing on his mind, his body responds too easily.

“Mika, I can’t—“

Mika shifts his grip, lacing their fingers together and pressing Shu’s hands into the mattress above his head. He leans down, dragging his tongue across Shu’s tricep and armpit. Shu flinches away from the touch. “Mika—“

“I know ya say it’s gross,” Mika murmurs against his skin. “But I like it. Yer skin tastes like ya most right here…”

Mika buries himself deeper. His hips pause for a moment as he studies Shu’s throat.

“You’ve been wearin’ higher collars,” Mika says, Shu breathes loudly beneath him. “Since it’s gettin’ cold… Can I mark ya up? You’ll be able to hide it…”

“Only… a bit…”

“Thank ya,” Mika says warmly, almost politely, before leaning down and kissing his neck innocently before he closes his mouth around the skin and sucks hard—

When he moves again, Shu feels him press so deep he sees stars. His back arches as he comes, fingers tightening around Mika’s as pleasure rushes through him in a wave that leaves him trembling.

“So pretty,” Mika whispers, almost reverent. “Master… Let me cum in ya… That way… It feels like we’re makin somethin’…”

“You’re— don’t say something like that,” Shu protests weakly, his body trembling as Mika thrusts into him once more. The sensitivity is almost unbearable. “Please..”

The impossible fantasy plays in his head as Mika fills him up.

Mika lets go of his hand only to slide it down, palm settling warmly against Shu’s stomach. Mika holds him close. “Can I stay like this forever?” Mika murmurs against his throat. “Well, I like it when yer inside me too… let’s both have babies?”

“You’re ridiculous,” is all he manages to say.

—

“I can’t believe ya just blew me up here,” Mika sighs, lying back in the hayloft, pants still undone. He doesn’t seem to care in the slightest.

Shu, on the other hand, is frantically wiping his tongue. “I swear… It tastes worse than last time. Are you even eating properly?”

“Yer the one who keeps me fed,” Mika huffs, mock-offended. “Ya know, that’s kinda rude.”

Shu freezes, hand paused mid-wipe, then pulls it away. “I need a drink.”

“Wanna get drunk on that liquor Rei left us?”

“I meant water,” he says, then hesitates. “Last time I drank…”

“I remember,” Mika says, recalling the memory of the island from a few months back. “But it’s fine… I think, especially if we’re both tipsy, so if anythin’ happens…”

“Is that really wise?” Shu raises a brow, glancing down for a split second. “Mika… put yourself back in your pants.”

“Sorry,” Mika mutters, readjusting himself. “Fine… we don’t get drunk. Though I do wanna try it—I’ve never had anythin’ to drink before, other than wine.”

—

“Master, isn’t it yer birthday?”

“Oh,” Shu blinks up at Mika as he approaches the tiny two-seater dining table with his hands behind his back. “Yes… how did you…?”

“What do ya mean, how did you—?! I remember from the years before, ya know.” Mika huffs, bringing his hands out to reveal a delicate bouquet… A knitted bouquet, not ephemeral. “I made you these…”

Shu looks a bit sad and surprised.

“Um, what’s wrong?”

“I may or may not have already seen them,” Shu admits.

Mika’s face darkens dramatically. “Seriously? I thought I hid ‘em pretty well…”

“Beneath the bed, Mika? Really?” Shu blinks. “You know I clean thoroughly… even there. Well, regardless, I didn’t check back. This is the first time I’m seeing them finished.” He takes them from Mika’s hands. “They’re lovely. You made the patterns all by yourself?”

“Yeah… sorry if it’s a bit messy…” Mika shrugs.

“They’re perfect. I’ll have to keep them in a vase, as decoration. They’ll last forever. Or at least, as long as I live—”

“Mmm, that was the idea.” Mika hums happily. “Happy birthday. Hey, Master… is there anything else ya want?”

“A croissant would be lovely, but I’m not in the mood to go into town,” Shu says, rising from his seat to find a vase.

“…Anything else?” Mika hums, tilting his head.

“Not that I can think of…” Shu grabs a small brown vase and places the flowers inside. “Oh, perfect. They fit just right.”

“Nothin’ else at all!?” Mika squeaks, eyes wide. “Seriously, I prepared myself for nothin’!”

“You—what?” Shu raises a brow.

“Don’t ya wanna fuck me?!” Mika squeaks.

“Watch your language!” Shu retorts, leaving the vase carefully on the counter. “You sound more desperate than me, surely this would be a present for you instead…” Shu reaches for him, “Of course, I don’t mind helping.”

“Ugh, pleaseee—” Mika whines, melting into him with that familiar mix of boldness and neediness that only Shu can handle.

—

“You have no need for that, and yet…”

“I like flyin’ every once in a while.”

“It is entertaining to watch, I’ll say,” Shu replies, reclining on the blanket he’s laid out by the pond. Mika has just shifted back from his crow form and is starting to put his clothes back on. Lately, he’s been testing how long he can stay transformed, but so far, it’s still never lasted more than an hour or so.

“Mika,” Shu says, halting him as he shimmies into his pants, “don’t bother.”

“Ya want me loungin’ around nude? That’s unlike ya…”

“Forgive me… I think the wine might’ve gotten to me.”

“Nhehe, it’s fine…” Mika tugs his trousers the rest of the way up. “I’ll leave the rest off. How about that?”

“That’s fine,” Shu lounges back on his elbows. “You should come here and feed me…”

“Feed you? What are ya, a god?” Mika teases, crawling closer and pulling out a bowl of fruit from the basket Shu brought. “Mm, I’d definitely worship ya if ya were one…”

Shu squints in the sunlight, then shuts his eyes again when he notices Mika watching him. Mika presses a strawberry to his lips, and Shu bites it.

“Don’t eat the leaves,” Shu says sharply, snatching it before Mika can.

“Ngah, ‘s a waste not to…” Mika grumbles, pouting.

“Eat something proper,” Shu says, sitting up. He digs through the basket and pulls out two slivers of cinnamon loaf. “I bought these for you when I went to town by myself.”

“Ngah!! Yer the best,” Mika beams, taking the bread eagerly.

—

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“Someone’s gotta…” Mika yawns, “…feed the animals.”

“Can’t they wait a bit longer?” Shu asks.

“Master, ya do this to me almost every mornin’…” Mika grumbles, but he lets Shu pull him closer for just a second longer. The bed is so warm, he wants to sink into it. “If ya wanna stay by my side, then get up and come with me…”

“And leave the warmth of my bed this early? No thanks. It’s winter now, I’ll stay here as long as I can.”

“Yer so spoiled,” Mika says fondly. “Guess growin’ up the way ya did leaves its mark, huh… mm, don’t worry. I’ll make sure ya stay spoiled forever.”

“You’re spoiled too,” Shu mutters. “I spoil you, don’t I?” He opens his eyes and blinks at Mika almost pitifully.

“Ahh, don’t give me that look!” Mika squeaks. “Yes, ya spoil me plenty. We spoil each other… but… I really gotta go feed them. I’ve got ‘em on a tight schedule, Master. Ya know how it is. You’d be peeved if I messed up your routine too… and don’t say you wouldn’t.”

“…Come back when you’re done.”

“Mm, ‘course. I’ll go super quickly too.”

—

When Rei visits, he brings a guest with him.

“Ngah… that’s the pervy guy…” Mika mutters under his breath.

“As if you’re any less ‘pervy’ than him,” Shu replies dryly. “You never told me what he said to you.”

“Nn… I don’t really remember,” Mika says, scratching the back of his neck. “My memory’s real bad sometimes.”

Shu raises a brow, skeptical, but doesn’t press.

Rei and Kaoru ride up on two large horses, light luggage strapped behind their saddles, snow dusting their cloaks.

“I hope the ride wasn’t too difficult,” Shu says once they’re inside the barn and Rei dismounts. “We’ve had more snow than I anticipated.”

“That’s hardly anything,” Rei says smoothly. “Have you seen my castle?”

“It snows nearly half the year up there,” Kaoru adds.

“I know you said it was alright to bring him,” Rei murmurs to Shu, just loud enough to be overheard, “but if he becomes unbearable, I’ll send him away~”

“Agh, Rei! That’s mean, you know!” Kaoru protests.

Mika, meanwhile, is already petting both horses, sneaking treats under their noses. Once the tack is removed, he leads them carefully into a spare stall.

“You look healthy,” Rei comments, peering in.

“Ngah, what’s that s’posed to mean?”

“You’re not as frail as you once appeared,” Rei says gently. “Like a little bird. Perhaps I’ll have to find you a new nickname… though I don’t know. Little bird suits you so well.”

“Rei,” Shu approaches, cool but pointed. “Are you teasing him?”

“It’s nothing he can’t handle,” Rei shrugs. “Right, little bird?”

“Nn…” Mika shrugs. “Yeah. ‘S fine.”

Later, they sit by the fireplace, tea steaming between them.

"You've settled in so well, I'm almost jealous," Rei says. "I'm glad I can visit. Unfortunately, I enjoy politics far too much to abandon it permanently…"

"I was going to ask," Shu says carefully, "any news of my family? My grandsire, specifically?"

"He's holding up well. The King hosted a gathering for the turn of the season—I saw him there. Conversing, charming the ladies and such."

Nearby, Kaoru and Mika sit on the floor with the fat cat. Mika dangles a loose crow feather, one he'd collected after shifting, and the cat bats at it enthusiastically. Ridiculous, considering he never chases actual birds.

"And you and Kaoru—?" Shu begins.

"It's not serious," Rei says with a casual shrug. "Well… perhaps he thinks it is. I don't exactly seek out others, but I don't refuse opportunities either."

"It doesn't upset him?" Shu asks.

Rei stares down into his tea. "I've never asked."

"Rei, don't you think your castle could use a cat?" Kaoru calls from the floor.

"Absolutely not. They're adorable, but don't they breed like rabbits?"

"Mm… just get one?" Mika suggests.

"But it'd get lonely."

"My kitty ain't lonely at all," Mika says defensively, scooping the cat up.

"That's because you're here to dote on him constantly," Rei replies smoothly. "Kaoru, you're rather like a cat yourself in that respect, lonely when unattended… and apparently just as prolific when left unsupervised."

"Rei!" Kaoru groans. "Don't bring that up again. Just 'cause I got one girl pregnant—"

"Yer a dad?" Mika squeaks, eyes wide.

"I mean—sort of? Not really? I tried to help out, but she hates my guts, y'know… so I don't push it," Kaoru says, rubbing the back of his neck. "It makes me sound awful… Ugh. She's married now, anyway, so it's fine—"

"At least you learned to keep yourself in check after that fiasco," Rei says calmly, lifting his teacup. "Some men never do."

"You sound like a gossiping old lady when you act like that, Rei," Kaoru says flatly.

Rei only smiles into his tea.

Shu and Mika exchange a look over their bickering.

"…Is anyone hungry?" Shu asks smoothly.

"Hush," Shu murmurs, pressing a hand over Mika's mouth. "I am constantly telling you to be quiet. Can you not learn from my example?"

Mika pries Shu's hand away, squinting at him. "Nn… this coulda waited 'til they left."

"Ah, but I was in the mood," Shu replies lightly. "You are always encouraging me to indulge myself. And so… here I am. Indulging."

Mika stares at him, his breath catching when Shu presses inside of him notably deeper than before—

A sound nearly slips out of him, but Shu kisses him before it can escape.

"Ughhh… it's worse when ya do that—"

"You would be far louder if I lost patience," Shu murmurs against his lips. "Unless I bury your face into a pillow you, which I would prefer not to. You're far too pretty."

"Can't get everythin' ya want," Mika pants, relief flickering across his face when Shu stills inside of him, only for it to vanish when he moves again, deliberate and controlled.

"Can't I?" Shu slips a hand down between their bodies and wraps it around Mika. "Be a good little crow…"

"Nn- Master—-"

"What, can't you do it?"

"Guh—"

Mika clutches him as his orgasm crashes over him, but his relief is short-lived as he chokes on his own spit, coughing in his throat.

"Mika—"

Shu pulls out, briefly stricken as he sits Mika upright before it becomes serious. Loud coughs spill out of him—no doubt audible beyond the room.

Mika pants heavily once it passes. "Oh m'god… that's embarrassin'…"

"I'm… sorry…" Shu says and then, traitorously, a laugh bubbles out of him.

"Stop! 'S not funny! Ya should feel bad fer me!"

"Stop—be quiet," Shu mumbles, half laughing, half mortified. "They'll hear you."

“Think it’s too late fer that…”

Notes:

This was my favorite to write lol

Notes:

ty for reading
i've already started on chapter 2 but being a student can get in the way sometimes... but i should finish it soon enough
i plan to make other chapters a bit shorter in length!!!
AGAIN TYSM FOR READING <3

Close (#)